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# Hosting the lament(s) of Others? Tensions and antinomies in Dries Verhoeven's *No Man's Land*

## ABSTRACT

*No Man's Land* was a peripatetic performance produced in Athens by the Onassis Cultural Center (2014) and previously presented in several European cities. According to its director Dries Verhoeven, the piece sought to explore 'what is a multicultural environment today' by staging one-to-one encounters, where (ostensibly local) spectators were guided by performers (migrants, refugees or asylum seekers) through the city while listening to a story of forced displacement and exile. Drawing on a corpus of semi-structured interviews with the Athens-based performers, this article examines the performers' own conceptions and experiences of this institutional attempt to 'host' the laments of Others, as 'both a performance and a political act' (Anon. 2014b). Participants' narratives are studied in connection to the representational strategies of the performance, in an attempt to unpack interrelations between these theatrical walks and everyday experiences of discrimination in the Athenian urban fabric. In doing so, the article reveals a larger field of tensions and antinomies between representations and presences, vocalizations and silences, languages of the Other and mother tongues, art and 'life'.

## KEYWORDS

lament  
suffering  
displacement  
hospitality  
hostility  
mother tongue  
racism  
performance

1. *NML* had previously toured in Utrecht, Hannover, Berlin, Amsterdam, Valencia and Munich (2008–14).
2. OCC's Greek name is Stegi Grammaton Ke Technon, which can be translated as 'Home of Arts and Letters'. The word *stegi* means roof, but also shelter and accommodation. This notion of the institution as a host is particularly interesting in the context of *NML*, given the particularities of the Athenian public sphere which I unpick below.
3. In 2014, Fast Forward Festival explored the relations between theatre and intermediality.

The foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated [...]. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host [...]. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence.

(Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000:15)

## INTRODUCTION

The themes of migration, forced displacement, asylum and exile have recently occupied a central role in contemporary Greek theatre and performance. An array of performances ranging from community-based initiatives to major productions, from improvised happenings to long-term workshops and from text-based drama to contemporary dance have appeared in different spaces from prestigious festivals to occupied theatres. While some of these examples are exclusively *about* the experiences of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, in several other cases the concerned subjects are *themselves* involved. A significant body of work by Greek artists who seek to address the 'refugee issue' tends to concentrate on narratives of suffering and particularly on the loss of displaced people's lives in their attempt to cross the external European borders. For example, director Themelis Glynatsis's staging of Angélica Liddell's *And the Fish Rise Up and Wage War Against Mankind* presented in the 2014 Athens Festival addressed 'the delicate issue of immigrants drowned in the waters of the Mediterranean' (Anon. 2014a). In 2015, director Anestis Azas devised *Ipothesi Farmakonisi i to Dikaio tou Nerou* (*Case Farmakonisi or The Right of Water*), a documentary theatre piece investigating one of the numerous deadly shipwrecks related to border-crossing attempts in the Aegean which was presented at the Athens Festival and at the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre. The following year, Vangelis Theodoropoulos directed Anders Lustgarten's verbatim play *Lampedusa* (*Theatro tou Neou Kosmou*), which revolved around the 2013 shipwreck a few miles from the Italian island that cost the lives of more than 300 refugees. It is worth mentioning that all these projects have been created *and* performed by Greek and/or European citizens who attempted to theatrically stage the laments of Others.

Against the above backdrop of works ranging from personal testimonies to poetic re-inscriptions of reality and from multilingual to monolingual performances, the presence of Others on Greek stages gives rise to a field of tensions and antinomies, which this article addresses by focusing on *No Man's Land* (henceforth *NML*): a walking performance directed by the Dutch artist and director Dries Verhoeven and produced in 2014 in Athens<sup>1</sup> by the Onassis Cultural Centre (henceforth OCC),<sup>2</sup> in the context of Fast Forward Festival.<sup>3</sup> I have decided to write about this work for two reasons: in contrast to the works mentioned above, this piece was performed by migrants, refugees and/or asylum seekers; moreover, it was not presented on a theatre stage, but outdoors, in the Athenian public space. Both choices raise crucial questions regarding theatrical representations of Otherness in connection to everyday life. At the time of the performance, twelve performers were based in Greece, while another ten were part of the fixed group that follows the director in different countries. According to Verhoeven, the piece sought to explore 'what is a multicultural environment today' through the performative staging of an *encounter* between 'locals' and 'foreigners', in the form of a reverse 'guided tour' (Anon. 2014b).

The performance started when twenty performers met the spectators in the metro station of Monastiraki in central Athens and became their one-to-one guides in the Greek capital. Equipped with an iPod, each audience member listened to a narrative in standard Greek,<sup>4</sup> interspersed with several songs, which could relate to their guide's own life story. The walk ended in a 'no man's land' at the fringes of the city centre, where twenty beach huts were installed. After each pair went inside a hut, the performers took off the spectators' headphones and whispered to their ears a song of their choice in their mother tongues. The performance ended once the performers conclude their song and they leave the space.

The host institution presented *NML* as a 'peripatetic performance/political act' (Anon. 2014b). The political character of the piece was emphasized by a short programme of parallel discussions on related issues.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this public encounter between 'natives' and 'Others' could hardly be understood outside its specific sociopolitical context. By 2014, Athens was severely marked by a multi-faceted crisis, whose side effect has been the rise of the far-right evident in the electoral success and violent activism of neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn and the escalation of nationalism and xenophobia. As Athena Athanasiou and Giorgos Tsimouris explain,

The recent crisis, in parallel with the shrinking of the welfare state, has set up the ideological context for the enhancement of a repressive state, the limitation of political and social rights, and the enhancement of limitations and controls for the 'dangerous Others', both native and not. Especially 'vulnerable groups' and 'minorities', historical or recent, have been treated either as the ones responsible for the crisis or as the scapegoats.

(2013: 15)<sup>6</sup>

In a short documentary mapping the post-Olympics/crisis Athenian landscape, president of the Athens-based United African Women's Organization Loretta Macauley discusses the hostility against and scapegoating of the migrants; she remarks that 'when they [the politicians] find out that some of the Greeks started to wake up [to protest for their rights], they give us to them, as the foreigners, to eat us' (Domoney 2014). Verhoeven also acknowledges the impact of this reality on his work:

In Athens, the hostility was so obvious that it immediately changed perceptions of the work. Due to this particular context, this performance also became a social intervention. It was hardly possible to consider the performance solely on artistic grounds. (forthcoming)

Given that *NML* was perceived and presented both by its director and the host institution as a 'political act' or a 'social intervention', this article seeks to investigate its aesthetic and political parameters. Based on a body of semi-structured interviews, I discuss the performance in relation to participants' experiences, by particularly focusing on an extensive discussion with one of the performers. My purpose here is to scrutinize this institutional attempt to 'host the laments of Others'. In doing so, I explore the field of tensions and antinomies introduced at the beginning of this article: between the single narrative suggested by the performance and the diverse narratives of the performers themselves; between the soundtrack and their songs, the script

4. This implies that, for the organizers, there is a presumption that spectators will be fluent in Greek. The exclusivity of Greece's official language in the audio track presupposes a homogeneous linguistic community that constitutes the public. In this sense, both parts of this supposed encounter between spectators and performers are schematically conceived: the former are *a priori* 'locals', while the latter are 'strangers'.
5. These two open discussions were titled 'The walls within the city' and 'No Man's Land: The "non-places" of today'.
6. All translations from Greek are mine unless otherwise stated.

7. The Greek production's script was reworked with a local dramaturgical team, in order to address local cultural specificities. As Konstantinakou, one of the Greek dramaturges (2014), and the comparison of the Greek and the English texts confirm, this reworking was more a fine adjustment than a radical adaptation of the script.

and their testimonies, the recorded voice speaking standard Greek and their live singing voices in their mother tongues; and between their theatrical experiences of the city – under the auspices of a major cultural institution – and their everyday mobility in its streets. But let me now begin by unpacking some key elements of *NML* that determined my entry point to the testimonies – the main subject of the analysis below.

### SCRIPT AND SOUNDTRACK

Although the audio script could be easily perceived by spectators as the 'real story' of their personal guides, the recording was in all cases the same, only shifting from male to female. This text was based on interviews conducted with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the cities where the piece has been performed and questionnaires to which the participants were invited to respond before the beginning of rehearsals. Each city's script revolves around a story of forced displacement and exile, emphasizing narratives of suffering and fleeing, whilst also alluding to issues of integration and survival in the host country.<sup>7</sup> In short, the story talks about a 'typical refugee' and the traumas of their displacement, independently of contextual specificities, or of each performer's personality.

I contend that this choice is problematic for several reasons. First, the construction of a 'typical refugee' through a common, repeated narrative risks overlooking the performers' singular trajectories as unique historical subjects. This generalization reflects broader cultural assumptions regarding the 'refugee experience'. As Liisa H. Malkki points out:

An obvious problem with the intellectual project of defining 'the refugee experience' is that it posits a single, essential, transhistorical refugee condition. [...] [R]efugees thus become not just a mixed category of people sharing a certain legal status; they become 'a culture', 'an identity' [...], 'a social world' [...], or 'a community' [...]. There is a tendency, then, to proceed as if refugees all shared a common condition or nature.

(1995: 511)

Moreover, such constructions of the 'typical refugee' relate to what Alison Jeffers defines as 'bureaucratic performance':

any asylum-seeker who wishes to gain recognition as a refugee must [...] convince the authorities that they have a clear and credible story which demonstrates individual past persecution in their country. [...] [T]he story [...] must be rehearsed to create a credible *performance*, convincing in the telling as well as in the construction.

(2012: 30–31, original emphasis)

In *NML*, this 'common condition or nature' or 'bureaucratic performance' is assumed to be Islamic, doubling a current stereotype regarding refugees, not always compatible with their actual religious identities. Although several of the performers come from Christian backgrounds, phrases in the script such as 'I could even be a Muslim', or 'I could tell you that praying to Mekka is like hunting for Easter eggs', reveal how Muslim identity and, by extension, the refugee experience become essentialized. In addition to this, as one of my Afghan interlocutors, himself a Shia Muslim, suggests, in the audio script the

Muslim subject appears to be coming from a Shia minority that is persecuted by Sunni extremists such as the Taliban (Durrani 2014). The appearance of the Muslim subject as the innocent victim of extreme organizations that terrorize the West is a recurrent trope in refugee theatre today.<sup>8</sup> As Emma Cox remarks, 'the refugee has as its spectral twin the high value terrorist, who by extreme volition has become a named, known, distinctive political actor' (2015: 59). Yet, in this troubling equilibrium, Cox warns that

when a politics of innocence in theatrical representation works to distance the asylum seekers or refugees as far as possible from their spectral twin, attempts to characterize the asylum seeker's own 'high value' can end up dispossessing them of political volition. (2015: 59)

Moreover, in *NML*, the 'typical refugee' is also produced through narratives of suffering. The insistence on such a trope does not simply show western theatre-makers' high degree of sensitivity regarding the refugees' plights, but also contributes to what Cox describes as 'the politics of innocence'. By dispossessing asylum seekers of political volition, *NML* reproduces common representational strategies of European asylum advocates that, as Heath Cabot argues, risk to 'perpetuate images of refugees as vulnerable and tragic figures, thus contributing to the silencing of refugees as active and critical subjects' (2016: 4). This also suggests that 'in representing human pain, theatre makers may fall into traps of voyeurism, pity and the aestheticisation of suffering' (Jeffers 2012:72). In *NML*, the possible individual experiences of suffering of participants seem to be erased by the overarching narrative of the 'typical refugee' that they are called to personify. It appears that, in its transnational collaboration with an established western European contemporary artist, OCC *hosts* the – plural – laments of Others by transforming them into a generalized, pre-decided and singular lament. It also transpires that the value of such an initiative cannot be taken for granted; following Derrida (2000: 4), the verb *to host* is understood in its etymological ambivalence between *hospitality* and *hostility*.<sup>9</sup> As Derrida reminds us, the foreigner (*hostis*) can be 'welcomed as guest or as enemy' (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 45). This conceptualization of hospitality as multi-faceted and contradictory cuts across the arguments presented here.

Nevertheless, the reductive strategy of *NML* described above is attenuated to a certain extent by the narrative tropes of the script. Drawing from his experience of the piece in Athens, Andy Lavender underlines: 'diverse experiences are reduced to a single narrative, which would be problematic except for the *trope of multiplicity* ("I might be [...] I could be [...]"), which necessarily fictionalizes the account even while it insists on a basis in experience' (2016: 41, emphasis added). However, contrary to Lavender's enthusiastic affirmation that the piece as a whole 'gives voice to a marginalized community',<sup>10</sup> I would propose that the subaltern protagonists of OCC's spectacle remain deprived of the possibility to speak. Instead, they can only whisper in their mother tongues in the midst of recorded songs. At this point, I would like to examine the production's soundtrack more closely.

The last song we listen on the headphones is 'Gute Nacht', from Schubert's *Winterreise*. Its opening verses ('A Stranger I Arrived; as a Stranger I Depart') close the piece with an imagery of absolute strangeness. This final point seems to underline the distance separating the performers from the audience,

8. An important example is the production *We Are the Persians* (Athens Festival 2015), directed by Yolanda Markopoulou and performed by refugees and asylum seekers from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The majority of performers are Shia Afghans of the Hazara tribe, fiercely persecuted by the Taliban. Following their personal histories, the performance's aim was to highlight the performers' vital reasons for fleeing their country of origin.
9. Derrida suggests that hospitality is 'a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, "hostility," the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body' (2000: 4).
10. The singular mode used by Lavender reveals that he follows the director's essentialization of 'the refugee'. As stated above, *NML*'s participants come from and are currently based in different countries. Their life conditions vary considerably; in this sense, writing about them as 'a marginalized community' (emphasis added) can be read as reductive and exoticizing.

11. 'Remember me/  
Remember me/But ah!  
Forget my Fate'

despite the director's claims to stage an 'encounter'. Moreover, the piece begins with 'Lament of Dido', the final aria from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, in which the princess of Carthage laments on the African shore her abandonment by Aeneas. This choice seems significant: Aeneas was the founder of Rome, and an iconic figure of western civilization; himself a war refugee who fled the flames of Troy. This counterpoint between the romantic lieder and the Renaissance lament alludes to questions of exile, fleeing, foreignness and abandonment. Furthermore, Dido's lament marks the first encounter between spectators and performers at Monastiraki metro station, whereby performers lip-sync the lyrics.<sup>11</sup> Such a directorial choice is an ambivalent one: on the one hand, performers appear closer to the 'western subject' through their performative engagement with an established European aesthetic form; on the other, they also identify with the abandoned African princess – always already mediated by European culture – ironically opposed to the founding figure of Aeneas. In fact, far from being considered as potential founders of a new Europe, 'the vanguard of their people' (Arendt 1996: 119), contemporary migrants and refugees from Asian and African countries in Greece are rather treated as pariahs. When they manage to survive from their perilous border crossing, they are trapped in a situation of precarious temporality. Not only does their chance of reaching their final destination remain suspended, but also their everyday mobility in the city is subject to multi-layered restrictions. But if the meaningful allusions suggested by parts of the soundtrack converse with the script of the performance, it is crucial to specifically consider the songs chosen and performed by the participants themselves, as they are the only instances when their voices and languages are heard. They also suggest ways in which the participants have managed to adapt themselves in a more or less fixed given structure in their own terms and perhaps even partially exceed it.

## LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THE PERFORMERS

'This is not my voice. This is not my language. This is the voice of an actor' are the first words spectators hear through their headphones. This opening highlights what Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, in her analysis of the Dutch production of *NML*, calls 'a problem of referentiality', created by 'the obscure relationship between the physically present migrant-performer and the manner with which he is represented by the prerecorded voice of an absent performer' (2015: 50). Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nibbelink reminds us that 'to deprive a person of a voice can hardly be called a suitable means for arranging a successful encounter' (2015: 51). Accordingly, my investigation focuses precisely on this moment in which we, as spectators, listen to the performers' whispered voices, singing in their mother tongues. These songs can be seen as antiphonal responses to Dido's lamenting voice; as murmured, plural counterpoints to her outspoken, singular lament.

With reference to the figure of Aeneas, Barbara Cassin writes that the Trojan hero will switch from Greek to Latin, which is the language spoken by the people of Latium, the place where he settles. 'The exile imposes that we abandon the mother-tongue [...]: we make the new homeland with the language of the Other' (Cassin 2015: 73). Yet, before learning 'the language of the Other' in order to 'make the new homeland', translation is a constant requirement. As Derrida suggests, the foreigner's vital need to translate and be translated is 'the first act of violence' operated upon her or him (Derrida and

Dufourmantelle 2000: 15). I propose that this kind of violence is reinforced in the case of *NML*: not only are the migrant's singular experiences translated to an essentialized, 'stereotypical story', but also this story is impeccably recited in the language of the hosts: what we hear through the headphones is 'the voice of an actor. But because of the Greek voice you will regard me differently, listen differently'.

If, as Derrida suggests, the translated script performs an act of violence, it is important to turn to the songs performed by the participants in their mother tongues. A rich body of literature regards exile as an experience of mourning not only the land, but also the language. Although it would be impossible to address this here in detail, I will briefly refer to Hannah Arendt's reflection on her personal relationship with her mother tongue:

There is a tremendous difference between your mother tongue and another language. For myself I can put it extremely simply: in German I know a rather large part of German poetry by heart; the poems are always somehow *in the back of my mind*.

(Arendt 1994: 13, emphasis added)

Following Arendt's thinking, I met *NML*'s Athens-based performers<sup>12</sup> from June to December 2014, in order to discuss the use of the songs in the piece.<sup>13</sup> Our discussions lasted from 30 minutes up to four hours maximum, whilst I also had the opportunity of two additional meetings with them. The point of departure has always been their song, on which we dwelt depending on the availability of each performer.<sup>14</sup> Some of my interlocutors briefly summarized its content, while others carefully transcribed and translated them. In doing so, many of them evoked memories relating to their piece and its initial context, while some also explained the logic of their choice. Interestingly, some participants compared the meanings and affects of their songs with Purcell's aria, while others unpicked a complex range of contents, not necessarily related with loss and mourning. Although my initial intention was to follow the participants' songs as laments, the material I came across also addressed, among others, issues of nation and race, love and religion, nostalgia and return.

By using the song as their springboard, several interviewees subsequently unfolded parts of their stories; from their past in the homeland, the reasons for their displacement, the – often perilous – journey to Europe, to their plans and dreams for a better future at their final destination. Most importantly, performers reflected in detail on their participation in *NML* often juxtaposing the act of walking in the city in a theatrical context with their ordinary experiences in Athens. While the script's narrative of suffering climaxed with an extremely violent incident in the country of origin, most of the interviewees insisted on questions of racial violence – both physical and psychological – currently experienced in Greece.

The performance was initially conceived for neighbourhoods densely inhabited by migrant populations, but the fact that these areas of Athens have recently witnessed repeated and increasing racist attacks forced the organizers to choose more touristic and comparatively safer areas.<sup>15</sup> By virtue of conducting interviews at the participants' own neighbourhoods, such as Amerikis Square, the people I met became once again my 'guides' in the city where we both live, inviting me to follow their steps. When I asked them which performance trajectories they would choose if they were consulted on this issue by

12. Despite anchoring my research in these encounters, I do not want to suggest any prevalence of the performers' 'real stories' over the 'fictional character' of the performance – a life story is always an *inventio*, and an interview is a social performance on its own right.
13. The interviews have been conducted in Greek, French and English.
14. Having informed them of my specific interest prior to our encounter, some of the participants were ready to recite – or even sing – and translate their songs, while others did not consider this part so important.
15. Designed by Antonas Office, the performance happened in Thisseio, Psirri, Ano Petralona, Piraios Avenue, Metaxourgeio, Gazi and Votanikos.

16. Composed by the words *hellene* and *phobia*, this neologism means 'to be afraid of the Greeks'. The term 'hellenophobia' has been used by Sub-Saharan African migrants in Greece to describe the precarious conditions of their lives. The phenomenon has been recently studied at the Geography Department of Harokopion University, Athens (Papadopoulos and Fratssea 2013).
17. 2012 marked the first electoral victory of the Golden Dawn; its entrance in the parliament has been followed by an increase of racist violence.
18. *The City at a time of Crisis* provides an interactive map of racist attacks throughout the region of Attica. In May 2011, Alim Abdul Mana from Bangladesh was stabbed to death after being chased by men on motorcycles in Patissia. In January 2013, Shehzad Luqman from Pakistan was stabbed to death on his way to work in Ano Peralona. In February 2013, Cheick Ndiaye from Senegal fell dead on the rail tracks of Thissio metro station, after being chased by municipality police officers. It is worth noting that only Luqman's incident has gained large public attention, as his murderers – members of Golden Dawn – were sentenced to life imprisonment. This was the first time that the Greek court acknowledged a murder as racially motivated (Anon. n.d.a).
19. According to the Cosse's 2013 report at the *Human Rights Watch*, almost 50 per cent of the Greek police

the director, some of them suggested that a guided tour in 'our Athens' would be closer to reality, while others, sharing the organizers' concerns, agreed that such a choice could be particularly risky (Sidiki 2014).

### 'I COULD NOT WALK WITHOUT LOOKING BEHIND': ON MOBILE SUBJECTS' RESTRICTED MOBILITY

I would not participate in *NML* if it took place two years ago. Because I could not concentrate [...] You see, at that time, I could not walk without looking behind. Because they [the Golden Dawn] had hit badly all the guys from behind. And at the bus station if you would see two guys dressed in black, you should always stay in front of them. At that moment it is common to say that there is xenophobia in Greece. But it actually was the opposite. We had hellenophobia (laughs), do you get it? We had hellenophobia.<sup>16</sup>

The need to move freely, to walk without having to constantly look over one's shoulder, as described above by Sidiki, a middle-aged male participant from Guinea, is supposed to be a right contemporary western urban dwellers take for granted. And yet, in Sidiki's account from two years ago, this freedom was selectively distributed in the public sphere.<sup>17</sup> In fact, during the last few years, movement within the Athenian urban fabric became an often life-menacing affair for racial Others, particularly African and South Asian migrants who have suffered innumerable physical attacks, including several murders.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the strong connections between the neo-Nazi party and the Greek police<sup>19</sup> had made it even harder for victims of racist violence to successfully defend themselves. As Sidiki remarks: 'where to go and make a complaint? To the police? (Laughs) They will kick you out; or keep you inside' (2014).

According to most accounts offered by the participants, the bleakest period spans from the June 2012 General Election to the prosecution of several Golden Dawn members in late 2013.<sup>20</sup> Although the electoral percentages of the party have yet to decrease and its founding members are still under trial, it is nonetheless noteworthy that people targeted by the neo-Nazi party locate their experiences in terms of *before* and *after* the initial arrest of Golden Dawn members. Yet, as my interlocutor ironically remarks, 'the police has now replaced the Golden Dawn'. This phrase echoes wider associations drawn between far-right violence and police operations sweeper that, according to Dimitris Dalakoglou, consisted in 'semi-military operations within the urban territory', including 'blockades of entire areas and rapid raids on streets, squares, and buildings, after which detainees were taken to concentration points where many of them were made to kneel on the ground and subjected to verbal abuse and physical attacks' (2012: 31). 'Xenios Zeus' was such an operation first performed in Athens in August 2012.<sup>21</sup> In an unconsciously Derridean way of thinking, the choice of naming the operation after the ancient Greek god of hospitality becomes an oxymoron, as it further associates hospitality (*xenia* in ancient Greek) with its opposite, hostility, towards foreigners (*xenoi*).

Although neo-Nazi action was not at its peak during *NML*'s run and despite its relatively safe localization, the fierce practices of the police had a palpable impact on the performers' reports. In light of this, the director decided 'to provide all performers with a badge, to hang around their necks, with permission stamps from the police and the local authorities. This badge



quite literally had a text on it which said: 'I am to be trusted' (Verhoeven forthcoming). As Verhoeven notes, this utterance demonstrates that 'the entire public sphere is infected with distrust and suspicion' (forthcoming). And, while for him it was hard to tell the performers that they would wear these badges, they were 'quite happy with it', and 'even asked if they could keep the badge afterwards' (Verhoeven forthcoming). In an attempt to further protect the participants and to ensure the smooth run of the performance, OCC's employees also followed the walks on bicycles. Whilst it was not rare for some of my interlocutors to be stopped by the police, performers were instructed not to step out of character in order to offer an explanation; they could only silently point at the badge and their legal documents while, if necessary, spectators would speak to the police in their guide's defense. As one of the participants notes, he was once walking with a spectator who was bursting into tears; the police stopped them, asking if the spectator was forced to follow. After the latter explained in Greek what it was about, the police let them continue. Even if they did know Greek, which was very often the case, performers had to stick to their performance of foreignness, understood as muteness. By having to play the role of an 'advocate', spectators therefore assumed an uneven relationship to the performers. This point troubled connections between hospitality and hostility. Not only were the performers silenced, with a recorded voice operating a violent act of translation on their behalf, their silences were also marked by an appeasing inscription. The illocutionary act 'I am to be trusted' seems to forestall here the 'question of the foreigner' (Derrida 2000: 3), offering, if not a name or a line of descent, at least a link with OCC, a prestigious Greek institution, in the role of a temporary host. Undoubtedly, the fact that performers were moving under the auspices of such a host had to be made visible in order to prevent, for instance, a Xenios Zeus operation that could disrupt the production. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that such an institutional assurance is not destined to offer safety to the guides/migrants, but, rather, aims to allow the performance to proceed – in other words, to assure the mobility of those already free to move around the city.

The contradiction between their ability to move in a theatrical context and their everyday restricted mobility is central to the accounts of NML's performers and is juxtaposed to the unhindered movement of spectators. Similar issues have already been addressed by recent scholarship on performance and asylum. In *Performance and Cosmopolitics*, Gilbert and Lo have critically discussed enthusiastic views about 'forced migrants and refugees as potential – and even exemplar – cosmopolitan subjects' (2000: 186), arguing that in the current circumstances of 'widespread, and often aggressive securitization and racialization of national borders, particularly between the West and the rest, the world's violently uprooted underclasses can be incorporated into notions of the ideal cosmopolitan subject only as its object Others' (2000: 187). More recently, Alison Jeffers suggested that

[m]obility is what marks the citizen's body as a body at home, drawing attention to the paradox that it is refugees who are classed as the 'mobile subjects' and yet their mobility is severely limited. Having left home under duress to arrive in the not-home, this move creates a not-not at home status by which asylum seekers are forced to remain in the place that they cannot leave but which is nonetheless 'unliveable'.

(2012: 64)

are Golden Dawn voters (Anon. 2013).

20. After the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, a well-known left-wing rap musician, in September 2013, the leadership of Golden Dawn was arrested, alongside dozens of party officials and members involved in criminal activities. After a nine-month inquest, the Court of Appeal charged 69 individuals, including all of Golden Dawn's Parliamentary Group, with participation in a criminal organization. The 1109-page-long decree describes all crimes committed by Golden Dawn party officials and members since 2008. The trial begun in April 2015 and set in motion a lengthy process which will primarily examine three cases: the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, the attempted murder of Egyptian fishermen in 2012 and the attacks against trade unionists of PAME (Trade Union Front) in 2013 (Anon. n.d.b).
21. Such examples connect to similar operations carried out by the Greek police in the early 1990s, with the aim to 'clean Omonoia's public façade and push unwanted elements toward less-visible areas of the center' (Dalakoglou 2012: 31). As Dalakoglou further elucidates, '[b]etween August and November 2012, of the 54,751 foreigners stopped and searched by Xenios Zeus in central Athens, 3,996 were arrested for lacking proper documents, whereas 33 were arrested for breaking other laws. Those arrested under Xenios Zeus are held in new detention centers [...]. The police reports that nearly every night since

August 2012 stop-and-search operations have targeted migrants in the center of the city [...]. Xenios Zeus reveals that the idea promoted by the government that migrants break the law *en masse* is a complete fraud, since the lack of the proper migratory documents is mainly due to the fact that the Greek state apparatuses that administer the application procedure make it notoriously difficult for migrants to apply for legalization' (2012: 31).

Several *NML* participants' accounts indicate that the temporary freedom of movement granted during the performance is repeatedly interrupted by suspicious authorities, despite the OCC's formal assurance. Nonetheless, they add that these interruptions reflect the multiple movement restrictions they face in their daily attempts to navigate the city; attempts determined by multi-layered borders, invisible to those not directly concerned. Furthermore, most of them also agree that not only their relation to the law (for instance, the lack of a valid residence permit) but also their very bodies and the colour of their skin become embodied borders that restrict their capacity to move and render them vulnerable to racist attacks. This is tangibly reflected in several accounts of physical and verbal harassment that map public space as a grid made of several limitations. For example, one of the participants mentioned how the increasing Golden Dawn violence forced him to move to another neighbourhood. Another one, living in Greece for many years and owning a flat, reported that his neo-Nazi neighbour bullies his young children on a daily basis thus forcing his family to stop using the shared spaces of their apartment block. Yet another of the participants recounted his personal experience of a severe racist attack, followed by police indifference and inaction. This person also suffers from diabetes, and his constant fear of both potential racist attacks and police arrest makes it nearly impossible to seek the necessary treatment at the free pharmacies of the NGO 'Doctors without Borders', putting his health at risk.

So far, I have briefly referred to the tensions and antinomies between the narrative of forced displacement suggested by the audio script and the participants' accounts of racist violence in contemporary Athens; also, between the participants' experiences of walking in a theatrical and an institutional context and their accounts of their everyday movements through the Athenian streets. Below, I further tease out these points, while exploring questions of voice, language, mother tongue, presence and representation. I do so with detailed reference to one of my discussions with a young performer of Nigerian descent born and raised in Greece, as this offers rich and nuanced material that thwarts inherent assumptions regarding Otherness and representation.

### **'TELL US A SONG FROM YOUR HOMELAND': MODALITIES OF FOREIGNNESS AND (NON)-BELONGING**

Referring to the audio script of the performance, Maria explains that

[t]his text speaks about rapes and this kind of things and OK of course I have not been physically violated, but I have been violated psychologically; all these years I am [...] without documents that allow me to go abroad and study, and do this and that [...] so in this sense I relate with this story; the other is physically raped, I am psychologically; the fact that I am going here and there so many years and law simply does not exist for me, it is as if I do not exist. And I do not exist neither in Nigeria nor in Greece. Where am I?

(Ikande 2014)

My interlocutor reflects on this limbo state of existing neither 'here' nor 'there' as an experience of psychological violation. As her words testify, this feeling of double foreignness is common to the so-called second-generation

migrants who, though born and educated in Greece, are deprived of citizen rights and are urged to apply, right after adolescence, for a residence permit.<sup>22</sup> Far from depicting an isolated case, Maria's account mirrors the experience of over 200,000 second-generation migrants. For African-Greeks, in particular, feelings of non-belonging are even more intense, as skin colour is a constant reminder of their foreignness. Similarly, a well-known Nigerian-Greek artist and activist Michalis Afolanio explains:

I understood I am not a Greek at the age of 18 when, having finished school, I decided to study Fine Arts. I was following preparatory classes on the island of Syros, studying drawing with a teacher. There, one afternoon, I was arrested; I had my birth certificate with me and I was very certain everything would be okay. I spent three days in jail. I decided to abandon everything, even my studies, and dedicate myself to the migration issue. There was a unique question that tortured me: why am I illegal?

(2015)

As both Maria's and Afolanio's accounts suggest, while they are confronted by a hostile host that refuses to acknowledge their existence, they can only invoke a remote 'homeland', with which in most cases there is no tangible attachment. As Maria explains, in the land of her birth, she is labeled as a 'second-generation migrant' who, upon becoming an adult, realizes has no political rights and is asked to continuously renew her residence permit in order to secure her stay, whilst the possibility of studying or working abroad remains suspended. And yet, in her parents' motherland Maria has never felt 'at home':

In Nigeria, if I want to stay and claim myself a Nigerian, they treat me as a foreigner. 'Hey, are you back? Etc, etc. How is life in Europe?' And you are getting quite an awkward feeling because there, everybody is supposed to be like you and mostly black and therefore you should feel more familiar but no, I do not feel familiar, at all. Because they treat you as a foreigner, and as the one that will go away at some point and does not belong there. They say this to me: 'You cannot understand our way of thinking. You there think differently. You have the white man's mentality.' So you listen to this and you realize that they did not fully accept you. They consider you someone foreign and will consider you something foreign for ever, that's it.

(Ikande 2014)

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness', firstly articulated in relation to experiences of African Americas in the beginning of the twentieth century, is relevant here. He defines 'double consciousness' as

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

(Du Bois 1903: 3)

22. This situation has relatively been improved eight months after our interview. The government bill passed on 9 July 2015 grants Greek citizenship to children born in Greece to migrant parents under the following conditions: 'a) 5-year legal stay of at least one parent in Greece b) Children born within this five-year period, during which at least one parent lived in the country, and c) Children enrolled in first grade and still attending school when they submit an application for the acquisition of nationality' (Agabani 2015).

Taken up almost half a century later by Franz Fanon (1952), the notion of ‘double foreignness’ has become crucial for post-colonial thought and might help us to further reflect on Maria’s position in the performance under consideration. Although she is born and raised in Greece, she is impelled to look at herself ‘through the eyes of others’: she participated in the production not because she is a foreigner, but because she *appears* to be one. Again, far from being an isolated case, this point further reflects the significant absence of racially diverse casts on the Greek stage; it is usually when a performance touches on issues of migration that actors of non-Greek, non-white descent appear onstage. As we have seen, Maria feels quite represented by narratives of suffering highlighted in the audio script, transposing the physical violence suffered by refugees to everyday psychological violence she experiences in Greece. I therefore suggest that, on another level, the production’s technologies of appearance take part in the same violence. Maria’s role in the performance, the role of the ‘typical refugee’, is cast based on her blackness staging her, once again, as Other.

### **BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE OF THE OTHER AND THE MOTHER TONGUE**

Yet, if Maria *appears* to be a foreigner, she clearly does not *sound* as such. She is a Greek native speaker. Moreover, she is fluent in English, while she informs me that her knowledge of Bena, her mother’s mother tongue, is rather rudimentary. As she explains, although her parents used to speak English at home, her late father had suggested that, given that she is born and raised in Greece, ‘she should not be outside’; her first language should be Greek. So, when asked to bring a song in her mother tongue for the performance, Maria recalls laughing: ‘I was the last one to find one, as I only knew Greek songs’. Nevertheless, she was asked not to bring something in Greek, nor in English, because in both cases the spectators would understand her: ‘We want them to feel something from *your own* country [...] from Africa’ (emphasis added). The use of the possessive pronoun here is significant: Greece cannot be conceived by ‘the eyes of others’ as ‘her own’ country. Maria’s ethnicity links her immediately and irremediably to the generalized, imaginary locus of the entire African continent.

Just two days before the premiere, Maria chose a song in Bena, her mother’s language – her mother tongue, in the literal sense. As she explains, although she never spoke Bena with her parents, she learned it from movies and from her grandmother, during her scarce visits to her place. Playfully, Maria remarks that her ‘grandmother would say “what a shame, you ‘slayed’ the song!”’ What does this choice tell us? What would have happened if, immersed in the cabin’s penumbra, convinced about the foreignness of her guide, one of the spectators would suddenly listen to a well-known Greek song, uttered impeccably from the lips of a black performer? What kind of encounter would such an unexpected turn suggest? Departing from the idea that the foreigner’s vital need to translate and be translated is ‘the first act of violence’, Derrida asks:

If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?

(2000: 15)

How would this question sound in Maria's case? Since she shares the same language as the spectators, would she still be a foreigner? If '[t]he exile imposes that we abandon the mother-tongue' (Cassin 2015: 73), for Maria, the 'language of the Other' is already her own. The poems that, to paraphrase Arendt, 'are always somehow in the back of her mind', are possibly in Greek. Yet, as shown above, the theatrical logic of representation seems to work more on the basis of Maria's physical appearance than her words. Ironically, her mother tongue coincides with the 'language of the Other', as staged by the performance; this is the language she is asked to lose, even temporarily, in order to fit the needs of the script. Thus, in order to *represent* a 'typical refugee', Maria does not only *appear*, but is also asked to *sound*, foreign. Consequently, her voice is invited to perform the expectations raised by her colour. To do so, she is asked to revert to her ancestors' forgotten tongue. Similarly, her walking silence, mediated by the standard Greek of the headphones, implies that the 'language of the Other' does not – or cannot? – belong to her, mirroring as Maria points out, her everyday reality.

In both theatrical and social contexts, I suggest, Maria's skin remains an impenetrable border, a constant sign of foreignness, at odds with her perfect Greek accent. As she recalls, it is not rare for an interlocutor to express surprise: 'Oh dear! You speak Greek so well?' Recalling multiple racist experiences, Maria remembers that, when she used to work at a clothing store in central Athens, a client once overtly expressed her terror when she found herself facing a black cashier. She also recounts how, each time there was a Golden Dawn march, the manager would close the shutters and hide her inside. '[T]hey could think the other cashier was Greek although she was from Albania, but me? My colour betrays me' (Ikande 2014).

If language, as Derrida suggests (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 133), is an 'automobile', a sort of second skin 'we carry with us', the analysis above has detailed some ways in which this second skin can be suspended, under the power of the first one, and the roles – both social and theatrical – it is invited to perform in order to *appear as* foreign. Yet, Maria's thinking in relation to the song she chose for the last scene of *NML* does not further enhance difference but seems to build the encounter with the spectators on a ground of commonality. Maria chose a song she heard at an Athenian Pentecostal Church which she regularly attends, alongside having been baptized in – and occasionally attending – the Greek Orthodox Church. Although, as Maria remarks, the latter would consider the former to be a sort of heresy, and although in *NML* the 'typical refugee' is clearly produced as Muslim, Maria deliberately justifies her choice of song by underlining the importance of a common point between performer and spectator.

I believe that, as we live in a country where the majority are Christians, so with this Christian song, even if the other does not understand, we can be bound to some extent. The thing is that we have the same religion, so I drew on this point. I do not know if I would say this song in a performance taking place in Iraq, because I feel we would not understand each other through this entry-point; but because we are in a Christian country, I feel there was some contact there.

(Ikande 2014)

Despite the performance's strategies to establish an encounter from a starting point of Otherness (the Other as Muslim, and/or Black, and/or having

23. It is worth mentioning here the performance of *To Tavli (The Backgammon)*, a modern Greek play by Dimitris Kechaidis, performed by two Greek actors of African descent (Theatro Academia Platonos 2015). The casting seems to mark a significant turning point: 'it is the first time that actors who are children of second and third generation migrants [...] play the protagonists' roles in a Greek play' (Anon. 2015).

a mother tongue other than Greek, etc.), and despite the constant classification as Other Maria is subject to in her everyday life in Athens, she deliberately seeks to establish a contact with the spectators from a position of similarity, of sharing the main religion, even if the dogma is different. The verses she chooses are telling in this regard: 'God is very nice/let all of us come together/ and praise him'. Thus, although Maria is invited to perform the skin that casts her as a foreigner, although she is theatrically deprived of her mother tongue – precisely because it coincides with the 'language of the Other' and although she has instead mobilized her ancestors' verses, alive through the embodied memory of a religious performance, the verses she chooses and the ways she justifies them do not further enhance foreignness. They do not allude to suffering and loss. Maria's song is definitely not a lament. It is instead a hymn that, as she suggests, aims to communicate with, and hopefully even touch the spectator, in a language which, though exotic and/or unintelligible, is nonetheless willing to be hospitable to its host.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to critically discuss an institutional attempt to host the laments of Others through the singular lament as implied by essentialized narratives of suffering and to unpack a larger field of tensions and antinomies between representations and presences, vocalizations and silences, languages of the Other and mother tongues, art and life. In doing so, I studied *NML*'s and Verhoeven's representational strategies in relation to the songs and narratives of the Athens-based participants, in an attempt to give a brief but clear image of both their performance and their everyday experiences in the city, determined by the complicated modalities of discrimination in the Athenian urban fabric. I focused on the account of a second-generation migrant, as it vividly depicts multiple contradictions inherent in both the theatrical frame of representation and the broader Greek public sphere. I have demonstrated the extent to which people who operate within specific structures have, nonetheless, the agency to adapt themselves in their own terms, and perhaps even partially exceed them. In order to conceptualize the body of theatre and performance work about and by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, which is becoming increasingly visible on the Greek stage, I propose that it is vital to keep in mind that participants' intentions and experiences may and do exceed the logic of theatrical representation. Moreover, I propose that the tensions and antinomies discussed above could also alert us on the multiple roles that people can take on, often in spite of the restrictions of the roles proscribed to them.<sup>23</sup> In this light, we can dream of future performances which, rather than theatrically reproducing Otherness, would undo, divert or even subvert it.

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