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Dance, multilingual repertoires and the Italian landscape: asylum seekers' narratives in an arts-based project

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact that an arts project had on the relationship between a group of asylum seekers and the Italian town where they live. The project brought together local youth and asylum seekers to engage in dance workshops and video-making workshops. This article combines interviews with project participants and teachers with an analysis of their artistic output. In doing so, it analyses how the multimodal nature of the activities enabled participants to communicate their concerns and aspirations without necessarily using the Italian language – emphasizing the body as a communicative resource and placing it in dialogue with the landscape.

Questo studio esamina l'impatto che un progetto artistico ha avuto sulla relazione fra un gruppo di richiedenti asilo e la città italiana dove vivono. Il progetto ha messo in contatto giovani del luogo con richiedenti asilo in un workshop di danza e cinematografia. Il presente studio include interviste a partecipanti e insegnanti del progetto, e l'analisi della loro produzione artistica. La natura multimodale delle attività ha consentito ai partecipanti di comunicare le proprie speranze e preoccupazioni senza necessariamente usare la lingua italiana – mettendo in risalto il corpo come risorsa comunicativa, e ponendolo in relazione con il paesaggio circostante.

Keywords: Asylum, dance, multimodal, multilingualism

1. Introduction

In the years 2014-2017, more than 120,000 individuals per year crossed the Mediterranean in order to seek asylum in Italy (Villa, Emmi, & Corradi, 2018, p. 10). This is part of a complex phenomenon that invested the Mediterranean as a whole, and that European media have come to call the *refugee crisis* (generally billed as *crisi dei rifugiati* or *crisi migratoria* in Italian media). In Italy as in other European countries, the use of a ‘crisis’ frame has generated discourses that portray asylum seekers alternately as threats or victims, calling for border closure or celebrating the culture of *accoglienza* (welcoming) – while making it increasingly more difficult to engage with the asylum seekers as individuals with complex stories (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). Journalistic depictions generally involve ‘alarmist tones, accompanied by a visual strategy that naturalizes and validates the illegalization of migration, relying on tactics of hypervisibility [...] while keeping them invisible as individuals’ (Mazzara, 2019, pp. 37–38). This article investigates a dance-based project for asylum seekers and refugees that took place in this context – more precisely in Perugia (Italy) in 2017. The study explores whether and how the project offered participants a chance to creatively express themselves outside of the discourses projected on them by the ‘crisis’ frame, and initiate dialogue with the people and environment around them.

The project under exam is *Bouge-Toi!*, created by a dance teacher and a video-maker to bring together local youth and young asylum seekers, mainly from Francophone African countries, engaging in dance workshops and parallel video-making workshops. This study combines interviews with *Bouge-Toi!* participants and teachers with an analysis of the video of their performances, analyzing how the experience of *Bouge-Toi!* interacted with the asylum seekers’ ‘lived experience of language’ (Busch, 2017) and their evolving relationship with the landscape of Perugia. Their involvement with the project forced them to mobilize and negotiate their diverse and complex multilingual repertoires, their evolving knowledge of the Italian language, and the totality of their semiotic repertoires (Kusters et al., 2017). The multimodal nature of the artistic output, in the end, enabled participants to communicate beyond and beside language: expressing their concerns and aspirations artistically without necessarily using Italian, emphasizing the body as a communicative resource.

2. Theoretical framework

In the age of globalization, sociolinguistics has reconfigured as the study of linguistic resources moving across the world in exchanges that are determined by socio-economic inequality (Blommaert, 2010). Great attention has been placed on the linguistic repertoires that come together in these

encounters, as they can reveal crucial information on the individuals who speak, and on the power relations between them. Repertoires, scholars argue, are more than the sum of languages, dialects and registers one uses: they are products of one's biography, since each of these linguistic resources 'was learned in the context of specific life spans, in specific social arenas, with specific tasks, needs and objectives defined, and with specific interlocutors' (Blommaert & Backus, 2013, p. 27). For this reason, Busch (2015, 2017) defines the linguistic repertoire as an individual's '*Spracherleben*, the lived experience of language' (2017, p. 341). Understanding one's lived experience of language means 'exploring the effects of language on their own unique life (hi)story', but also looking at 'the many external pressures that constrain and shape this (hi)story and the ways in which it can be constructed and told' (Stevenson, 2017, p. 78). Linguistic repertoires are biographical features (Nekvapil, 2003), an active trace of one's trajectory across the world and of the many external pressures – national ideologies, inequalities, racial constraints – that one has encountered in that trajectory.

The repertoires of asylum seekers who have recently arrived in Italy (such as the ones interviewed for this study) are often rich and complex, but rarely acknowledged. It is not uncommon to encounter migrants arriving from countries like Senegal or Mali who speak three or four languages (D'Agostino, 2017, p. 139): but lack of Italian proficiency (especially if coupled with lack of literacy) is what ultimately determines their possibility of interaction. Modern-day preoccupations with refugee 'integration', in fact, are mostly about the newcomers' need to learn the local national language. The perceived need to become proficient in the national language generally interacts with the goal of making a migrant 'skilled' for the job market (Del Percio, 2018; Vigouroux, 2017); and the authorities' need to assess their skills (Flubacher & Yeung, 2016). In this context, looking at different languages as part of an asylum seeker's semiotic repertoire, where it coexists with other modes of expression, can help paint a more accurate picture of multilingual interactions, and of the aesthetic potential that lies beyond the asylum seeker's proficiency in the new language.

As linguists delve deeper into contexts of multilingual interaction, it becomes increasingly clear that individuals deal not only with others' linguistic repertoires but also with a wealth of sensorial information (smell, taste, touch), different modes of communication (such as gestures) and the spaces themselves (Pennycook, 2017; Zhu, Otsuji, & Pennycook, 2017). The notion of a multilingual, multimodal 'semiotic repertoire' encompasses all communicative resources that individuals can use in contexts of interaction to create and disseminate meaning (Kusters et al., 2017; Kusters, 2021). As people meet and communicate, different semiotic repertoires and literacies (including media literacies)

reflect different social status, so that ‘to understand meaning-making in multimodal encounters, attention must be paid to the differential valuing and positioning of people and resources’ (Hawkins, 2018, p. 64).

The attention to semiotic repertoires in their entirety allows researchers to pay greater attention to the body, which can also be understood, for its role in intercultural encounters, as home to strong emotional and affective responses – positive or negative – to difference (Wise, 2010). When people who do not speak the same language come into contact, they can bridge such gap by using a wide range of modes of communication, which crucially includes gestures and facial expressions (Blackledge & Creese, 2017). This is relevant for asylum seekers (and newcomers in general) who learn the local language by being physically positioned in the context of learning; and together with language they also learn how to decode gestures, facial expressions, smells and noises, while learning the function (and therefore meaning) of places and objects in the new landscape.

In their ethnographic study of a karate club in London, Zhu Hua and her colleagues argue that the everyday dimension of learning a language also includes ‘learning to orchestrate, as the participants in the karate club do, multilingual, multisensory, multimodal, and multi-semiotic resources to make meaning and to make sense’ (2019, p. 81). In the case of karate, the coupling of ritualized movements and Japanese words convey the culturally significant values that the *sensei* wishes to communicate to his pupils. For this study, it is crucial to bear in mind that dancing can not only be considered a way for the body to bear meaning; but that dance has many features in common with spoken or written language. Movements can comprise the ‘vocabulary’ of a particular dance style, sequences of movements can be treated as a ‘syntax’, and dancers (in ballet, for example) can perform ‘speech acts’ with their movements (Bannerman, 2014). Dance moves can, therefore, be considered as part of a person’s semiotic repertoire.

In the last few years, research has underlined how arts-based activities of various types may yield interesting results in the interaction between communities and newcomers (Evans, 2019; Phipps & Kay, 2014). They may help multilingual youth’s creative exploration of the landscape that they inhabit (Bradley, Moore, Simpson, & Atkinson, 2018). Practical activities, such as crafting artefacts (Frimberger, White, & Ma, 2018) have the potential to involve migrants and refugees in forms of expression that take place beside or beyond language, freeing them of the need to speak or write in the language of the host country. Theatre, because of its reliance on bodily expression together with

linguistic expression, can be used to involve migrants in conversation (Wells, 2018), as well as foster the intercultural communication abilities of students (Harvey, McCormick, & Vanden, 2019).

Exploring such pathways for interaction between locals and newcomers is a matter not only of aesthetic possibilities but of linguistic justice, broadly intended not only as the provision of multilingual services but as the ‘acknowledge[ment] that everyone has the right to be heard and to be listened to’ (Piller, 2016, p. 162). Commenting on a programme for refugees in Scotland, Hirsu recently noted the efficacy of replacing language-learning models that place the burden of language acquisition on the newcomer with activities putting ‘people in communicative contexts where all resources need to be combined and intertwined in order to be with one another and act in the world in meaningful ways’ (Hirsu, 2020, p. 12). How did *Bouge-Toi!* combine the linguistic and semiotic resources of refugees and teachers, and what kind of artistic output came out of this encounter?

3. Context and methodology

Asylum seekers arriving in Italy – through the Mediterranean route or otherwise – enter the national refugee hospitality program, which decides their accommodation for the months (often years) leading to the outcome of their asylum application: this generally includes small apartments as well as repurposed hotels and other bigger structures.

. At the time of the research in 2018, the system had two main strands: an ‘emergency’ program called *CAS (Centro Accoglienza Straordinaria)* with reduced integration services; and a more integration-focused one called *SPRAR (Servizio Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati)*. At that time, they both included some form of Italian language classes, which would be limited a few months later by a new government’s decree. In class, asylum seekers and refugees learned the basics of the language, focusing on some real-life contexts such as grocery shops and hospitals. The goal in these language classes is generally to provide linguistic tools that will enable them to navigate their most immediate needs, but they also have a strong focus on language skills as a factor of employability.

Bouge-Toi! was created in this context, developed in Perugia by the local dance school Dance Gallery and co-funded by the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, with support from other local associations. A dance teacher, Valentina Romito, and a video-maker, Gilles Dubroca, were the creators and the main teachers. The name means ‘move yourself’ in French, and in the words of the organizers, it was explicitly meant to inspire young asylum seekers who were caught in the

inaction that derived from lack of work and documents. It is not casual that the project has a French name, as its creators are French-Italian bilinguals and they wanted to exploit this asset to reach out to Francophone asylum seekers who accounted for the great majority of students. The project ran between May and July 2017; it was advertised with local asylum seekers hospitality centres, but a good deal of recruitment also happened via word of mouth. While a number of individuals attended one or more meetings and then dropped out, 7 Italians (2 men and 5 women) and 14 other nationals (13 men and 1 woman, from Ivory Coast, Guinea, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria, France) took part in the project until the end, engaging in the production of creative outputs. Participants in the dance workshop worked on creating individual choreographies by the end of the project; while the participants in the videomaking workshop acquired skills that would help them realize short video clips based on each choreography from the other group. Each group met three evenings per week, for workshops that could last up to five hours each. While the initial intention was to keep the dance group and the videomaking group separate until they were to engage in the creation of the videos, some individuals chose to take part in both workshops. This meant that in the end they both created their own choreography and filmed one of their classmates; but in any case, all videos were the result of the combined efforts of a dancer and videomaker, with input from both the teachers and the rest of the group. In the end, the *Bouge-toi!* participants produced 15 videos, set in and around the town of Perugia.

This study investigates *Bouge-Toi!* as part of a larger ethnographic research project about refugee language learning in Italy, which involved two years of secondment and fieldwork in Perugia (October 2017- September 2019), in partnership with the local non-governmental organisation Tamat. The present study took place in parallel with an ongoing ethnography of Tamat's activities and of the language learning strategies of refugees who were involved in the activities (see Ciribuco, 2020). It was informed by the knowledge of the territory, of local refugee hospitality centres, and of the local non-profit sector gained during the project. The present study was designed as a mixed-methodology study that combined interviews with the individuals involved in the *Bouge-Toi!* (both teachers and students) and the textual analysis of their creative outputs, with the goal of assessing how the creative outputs emerged from the multilingual/multimodal interaction between teachers and students.

In February 2018 I contacted Romito and Dubroca, who helped me get in contact with the *Bouge-Toi!* participants with a migrant background. Three men responded to the invitation: after they were carefully explained the purpose of this study, in accordance with protocols agreed with the Research Ethics Committee at NUI Galway, they accepted to participate. Other *Bouge-Toi!* participants

did not respond to the invitation, while some had left Perugia at the time. To protect their privacy, I will call the three key participants Pierre* (Cameroon), Solomon* (Ivory Coast) and Hugo* (Cameroon). Between February and April 2018 Pierre* and Hugo* were interviewed three times each, while Solomon* was interviewed twice (once with support from Pierre*, as per his request), for a total of 397 minutes. Interviews discussed, in this order: participants' linguistic backgrounds and experience learning Italian; interactions with *Bouge-Toi!* teachers and participants; the process of creating their choreographies. In August 2018, I also interviewed Romito, to learn about her teaching goals and techniques. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed and anonymized in accordance with the ethics protocol. The transcripts were analysed to understand the role of different languages in *Bouge-Toi!*, as well as how the participants' linguistic repertoires evolved during and after *Bouge-Toi!*

In addition to the interview transcripts, the corpus includes the 15 *Bouge-Toi!* videos (publicly available at <https://vimeo.com/222934440>). These were retrieved from the project's Vimeo channel and analysed, looking for patterns in the use of Italian (and other languages), for patterns in the dances' narrative structures, and for interactions with culturally significant spaces in Perugia. Please note that, as the videos are publicly available and indicate the authors' names, while the interviewees wish to remain anonymous, the videos will be analysed separately from the interviews, in section 6. Interviewee pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*), while names without the asterisk are the published names used in the videos. They do *not* necessarily refer to the same persons.

4. Mobility and immobility

This section outlines the linguistic background of the interviewees, as well as their predicament before they joined *Bouge-Toi*. Based on their narratives, it explores the conditions of mobility and immobility that they experienced in the hospitality centre where they lived, at the outskirts of Perugia.

The three interviewees for this study have very diverse and rich linguistic repertoires; but their resources have been of little help to them in Italy. Pierre*'s self-reported proficiency in thirty-six Cameroonian languages, though impressive, is ineffective in Italy; and so are Solomon's* and Hugo*'s native languages, respectively Malinke and Bassa. Their home countries claim to be part of a global *Francophonie*, but living in Italy instead of France or Belgium makes their French proficiency much less effective. None of them had any Italian upon entering Italy, but they all attended their mandatory

language classes – though Hugo* lamented that he had to wait six months after arriving in Italy before classes started.

In the hospitality centre, their social network was composed mainly of other asylum seekers and refugees. The Italian hospitality system does not necessarily arrange for asylum seekers with the same background to live in the same centre; which means that their centre, like others, was home to conversations in several languages. While some are lucky enough to be able to speak their native language with fellow guests, the most important languages are French and English, with a smattering of contextually relevant Italian words (such as *permesso di soggiorno*, ‘residency permit’, or *questura*, ‘police station’). Opportunities for contact with the locals are often limited to individuals with specific roles: social workers, language teachers, doctors, or law enforcement.

Hugo* describes the hospitality centre as a situation of forced immobility:

Excerpt 1

Italian / **French** / [*English translation of Italian and French*]

Hugo*: sì allora eh stavamo solo all'albergo, dormire, su internet

[*yes eh we were just at the hotel then, sleeping, surfing the web*]

allora avev- avevamo le teste che faceva un po' ... come dire ... **surcharge dans la tête**

[*and so our heads were a little ... how do you say ... overloaded in the head*]

Hugo*'s French phrase aptly describes the ‘overload’ of emotions as a result of months spent waiting for news about one’s asylum application, with little other occupation (depending on the availability of language classes) than sleeping or surfing the web.

While many succumb to this secluded existence, others take any opportunity to go out and attempt to forge meaningful relations with the Italian landscape. Without a car, and often without bus money, their main technique of exploration is walking, as indicated by Pierre*:

Excerpt 2.

Italian / **French** / [*English translation of Italian and French*]

Pierre*: Io prima camminare è qualcosa che ho iniziato a fare quando sono arrivato in Italia

[*First of all, walking is something that I started doing after arriving in Italy*]

perché quando sono arrivato non c'era niente da fare, perché quando arrivi non parli la lingua non fa niente,

[because when I arrived there was nothing to do, because when you arrive you cannot speak the language cannot do anything]

non c'è nessuno che ti dice guarda il centro è da questa parte, l'ospedale è lì...

[there is nobody to tell you look the city centre is this way, the hospital is there]

e allora io ho iniziato a camminare per niente

[and so I started walking for no reason]

è da lì che più cammino più vado a **découvrir**, come si dice?

[and since then the more I walk the more I **discover**, how do you say?]

For Pierre*, walking is a basic reaction to the bureaucratic limbo where he is constrained. Walking, however, is also an important means of understanding a landscape. Buhr uses the phrase ‘urban apprenticeship’ to ‘take account of the various ways migrants accommodate a once opaque urban labyrinth into an intelligible and resourceful space by their practical engagements with the city’ (2018, p. 316). I would argue that, from a semiotic point of view, this is a discovery not only of how the city works, but of how the city means (and therefore, how it starts to make sense after presenting itself as ‘opaque’). It is also an act of meaning-making, as the walker impresses new meaning on the landscape by clearing paths and affirming his right to walk them. It is not, however, a guarantee of acceptance as the exploratory walking can be seen by locals variably as unproductive (while a migrant should be preoccupied with ‘integrating’, i.e. finding work) or threatening. Parati notes that ‘if a city is walked and therefore “spoken” by the migrant, it means that the familiarity that the people who define themselves as natives enjoy is constantly challenged’ (2017, p. 59). One driver of anti-immigration discourse (‘taking back *our* streets’) is precisely this sense of mismatch with the ideal of a neighbourhood/city as ethnically homogeneous spaces.

Bouge-Toi! offered the asylum seekers a space to perform creatively in the same streets and parks where their presence is highly visible and yet subject to a debate that excludes them. Mazzara noted that in the context of mainstream representations of asylum seekers, where they are very visible as foreign bodies while their concerns and aspirations are invisible, ‘art has a great potential to overturn their logic, and to destabilise the strategies of visibility/invisibility that are in place’ (Mazzara, 2019, p. 148). As the encounter between Pierre* and the *Bouge-Toi!* project demonstrates, however, one must account for a great number of negotiations across linguistic difference and power imbalances, before this potential is unleashed.

5. Negotiating language and dance

Bouge-Toi! was not a language teaching programme. However, in bringing together asylum seekers with teachers and local youth, it impacted the semiotic repertoire of all participants. Chaplin (2018) observed in creative writing courses for refugees in the UK that students sometimes experienced frustration or dissatisfaction at having to write in a second or third language; while Wells noted, of a theatre workshop for migrants, that ‘reliance on other modes and resources’ could ‘complement and at times replace the purely linguistic mode for both communicative and performative purposes, often with highly creative results’ (2018, p. 204). Reliance on modes of embodied communication, rather than spoken or written language, seemingly helps bridging language gaps. However, the case of dance – highly codified through different ‘languages’ belonging to different cultures or epochs – shows that embodied expressive modes can also generate incomprehension. As this section will illustrate, differences and diffidence played a part in the negotiations that led to *Bouge-Toi!*’s artistic output.

As Valentina Romito explained to me in an interview, her goal as a dance teacher was not to use their ‘traditions’ (part of what I have called their semiotic repertoires), but channel personal memories and traditions together into choreographic writing (‘non... usare la loro tradizione di movimento ma usare la loro memoria e le loro tradizioni ed incanalarle in una scrittura coreografica’). She encouraged participants to tell stories with their bodies (‘raccontare con il corpo’). ‘Choreographic writing’ entails the creation of new meaning: from their memories, and from their own repertoires of gestures and movements, as the participants were asked to tell their story or speak about a theme that they particularly cared about. This enlarged the participants’ semiotic repertoires, exposing them to contemporary discourses about dance and their expressive potential. It provided them with a means of expression that did not rely exclusively on language (preventing issues observed by Chaplin in creative writing courses, for example) and at the same time helped them improve linguistic proficiency, as we shall see. However, it also meant that the expressive goal as envisaged by the project’s creator effectively superseded the participants’ previous experience of dance, leaving them unable to rely entirely on their existing repertoires. This was met with some uneasiness on the asylum seekers’ part, especially in the first few weeks of *Bouge-Toi!*

At the start of the project, the organizers reached out to a community of asylum seekers who did not necessarily think that their European experience would include a dancing class. Pierre*, who was one of the first to join, recalls being doubtful:

Excerpt 3.

Italian / [English translation]

Pierre*: io mi ricordo che anch'io mi sono detto:

[I remember I also told myself:]

va bene, io lascia perdere perché quella cosa lì è una perdita di tempo,

[okay, I'm quitting because that thing is a waste of time]

non è qualcosa per me e sicuramente anche la grande parte dei miei amici mi diceva proprio:

[it's not for me and certainly most of my friends were telling me:]

guarda questa è una cazzata, loro fanno le - sono cose dei - dei bianchi...

[look this is bullshit, they're doing the – that stuff is for – white people...]

On one hand, Pierre*'s remark that the activities seemed like a 'waste of time' points to the fact that the project required asylum seekers to move beyond the elementary concerns of getting documents and a job: that unlike other courses offered by the national 'integration' programs, *Bouge-Toi!* did not offer commodifiable skills. In the interview, Pierre* goes on to explain that he ultimately convinced himself to continue with *Bouge-Toi!*, and even helped the organizers recruit other participants, on the basis that 'getting to know other people' was still better than forced inactivity. However, Pierre*'s remark that many of his friends perceived *Bouge-Toi!* as 'cose dei bianchi', underlines apparent criticalities in a project whose creators intended to foster intercultural communication, and yet began with the beneficiaries noticing a divide between them and the 'whites'. The teachers' intention of sharing techniques of creative expression encountered diffidence, which was based both on different ideologies of dance, and on the awareness that teachers and prospective students ranked differently in the town's racial and social hierarchy. As we shall see, it would take some time and a joint effort to overcome this diffidence and bring together the project's core group.

Pierre* and Solomon* explain that they initially thought that *Bouge-Toi!* would involve dancing to music of their choice:

Excerpt 4.

Italian / **French** / [English translation]

Pierre*: Allora anch'io quando sono andato mi dicevo:

[so I went there and told myself:]

va bene andiamo a ballare, mi chiedono di dare una musica del Camerun, io ballo come la so ballare in Camerun,

[okay let's go dancing, they will ask about Cameroonian music, I'll dance like I know how to in Cameroon]

sicuramente non mi fanno fare una scuola come muoverti.

[surely they won't make me go to a school on how to move]

Era proprio così per tutti anche lui era [inaudible] **le coupé decalé** che è la danza, danza...

[that was the same for everybody, he too was [inaudible] coupé decalé which is the dance, dance...]

Solomon*: della Costa d'Avorio

[from Ivory Coast]

The reference to *coupé decalé*, a dance originating in the Ivorian diaspora in Paris and combining traditional Ivorian elements with hip-hop and techno, exemplifies the participants' musical and visual backgrounds. Dance, as embodied language, can be highly linked to specific places, cultures, and social strata. *Coupé decalé* is part of Solomon*'s semiotic repertoire, and it includes a series of moves that, together with the music, are highly meaningful as they enable him to communicate his identity as a young Ivorian. Pierre*'s remark that he did not think he would have to 'go to a school on how to move' is also highly significant, as it shows at once how he conceptualized his own semiotic repertoire of dance styles as the 'natural' way of moving; and saw the addition of different styles as a 'scuola', like the school of Italian that he attends as part of the refugee hospitality program. In the context of their involvement with a state apparatus that sees the adoption of specific patterns of language and behaviour as a precondition of hospitality (Vigouroux 2017), the dance class initially felt as yet another superimposition of 'white' content over their semiotic repertoire.

The course's purposefully multilingual environment, together with physical proximity between Italian and non-Italian participants and teachers, helped overcome diffidence and create dialogue. *Bouge-Toi!* teachers relied on their own bilingualism and hired a community interpreter to facilitate communication. An environment where French coexisted with Italian helped mitigate relative positions of power, as both Francophone and Italoophone people experienced moments of misunderstanding. In the linguistic fluidity of the situation, compromise between different repertoires became possible: for example, a Nigerian woman who did not speak any French could still be included as she was an independent speaker of Italian. The interpreter proved instrumental to this exchange; but it was engagement in a shared physical activity that eventually improved spoken communication as well. Pierre* describes how the teachers paired Italian with non-Italian participants in the dance activities, creating opportunities for conversation:

Excerpt 5.

Italian / [*English translation*]

Pierre*: allora a questo punto eri obbligato a parlare con la tua amica che dovete ballare insieme,

[*so you are forced to speak with your friend if you have to dance together*]

dovete ... tu devi seguire i suoi passi, tocca parlare insieme.

[*you two must ... you must follow her steps, so you gotta talk to each other*]

Allora la seconda settimana abbiamo iniziato, come ti chiami? Io sono [Pierre*], l'altro è [xxxxx],

[*So the second week we started, what's your name? I'm [Pierre*], he's [xxxx]*]

Busch's idea of the 'lived experience of language' builds on Merleau-Ponty's concept that language is a bodily phenomenon, linked to our positioning with respect to the world (2009, p. 238 in Busch 2017); so that the 'emotionally charged experience' of interaction 'inscrib[es] language experience into body memory, or more specifically into the linguistic repertoire' (Busch, 2017, p. 352). Pierre*'s experience of positioning himself with respect to an Italian dance partner also inscribes a specific experience of Italian into his repertoire, which is different from the one of the mandatory language class, in terms of physical proximity and hierarchy: if you have to follow one's steps in a dance every week, he says, you eventually have to find a way of talking to each other, negotiating across communicative gaps.

Pierre*'s subsequent remarks show how many of the features of *Bouge-Toi!* that made communication possible derived from the project's multilingual and multimodal nature. The fact that many dance terms used in Italian are originally French (he gives the example of the movement called '*plié*') helped levelling the hierarchy between languages. The fact that teachers could physically show movements in addition to explaining them also favoured their comprehension. In their study on translanguaging and the body in a street market, Blackledge and Creese noted how the deployment of "semiotic repertoires of gestures, eye gaze, nods and head shakes, shrugs and smiles" enabled conversations to go on untroubled by linguistic differences (2017, p. 266). Observing a *capoeira* teacher, Baynham and Lee already noted how teaching dance moves entails fluently combining "language and something from [the teacher's] repertoire of capoeira movements, something inscribed in his body" (2019, p. 110). It is possible to argue that, in the *Bouge-Toi!* class, the sharing of words and codified gestures, together with their *inscription* into the participants' body repertoires (in the sense used by Baynham and Lee) by practice and repetition, in a communal setting with a common creative goal, gradually dispelled diffidence.

As the group of participants established personal links with the teachers, they also learned that the new dance styles could coexist with their previous experience of dancing. Hugo* explains that the difference between the reggae music that he used to dance to in Cameroon and the ‘danza contemporanea’ that he has learned in *Bouge-Toi!*, is that in the latter he had to learn how to convey a story and a message with movements (‘dobbiamo ballare di cultura d'una storia ... tra i movimenti ... e ... fare un messaggio’), while in dancing to reggae as a teenager he simply moved ‘freely’. There is no doubt that, even if many participants ended up incorporating reggae or hip-hop elements in their choreographies (as I will discuss below), the type of dance that they learned in *Bouge-Toi!* would remain separate as an addition to their repertoires. However, this type of dance ended up being accepted: it was linked to emerging friendships as well as to the possibility of telling their stories to an Italian public. An important feature of repertoires is, in fact, their openness to incorporating different semiotic resources that one encounters in life (Blommaert & Backus, 2013).

In a sense, the movements would ‘translate’ the participant’s story. They discussed, in open sessions with all participants and teachers, what story each student wanted to tell, and what dance moves would help them tell it. In this case, dance was not explicitly the intersemiotic translation of a text from another medium, such as a poem or picture (see Aguiar & Queiroz, 2015; McCartney, 2019). There was, however, *something* that the dance stood for, and replaced: and that something could be a particularly delicate and traumatic narrative. An asylum seeker’s story is a source of ongoing trauma, and at the same time an object of endless scrutiny by local authorities during the asylum process (Spotti, 2018). *Bouge-Toi!*’s focus on dance-as-writing helped participants engage with personal stories and with their identities in unique and novel ways that fall outside the logic of the asylum hearing. Many chose to take the opportunity to perform narratives about personal experiences of loss, alienation, displacement, and nostalgia. The translation into ‘choreographic writing’ in these cases proved often difficult for its highly emotional content: for example, Hugo* claims that the other participants tried to dissuade him from telling a particularly traumatic story.

In parts of the interviews that I will not quote to protect their privacy, Hugo* and the others showed to me in detail how every gesture, posture and movement in their choreographies corresponds to a particular feeling or event. This includes not only the way in which speed or width of movements conveyed the appropriate range of emotions, but also culturally coded gestures (prayers, greetings). The narrative structure is conveyed by movements through the course of the choreography (sometimes helped by sparse linguistic cues, as we shall see). In the following section, I will analyze a selection of

videos from the corpus, to analyze how this narrative was construed in relation to the landscape of Perugia.

6. Re-positioning the migrant body

The analysis of the *Bouge-Toi!* videos is made problematic by the fact that, apart from moves miming specific actions (such as hugging, praying, fighting), dance rarely has a fixed referential function; however, dance has some features that make it syntactically organized like a language: ‘a run, jump and fall’ may suggest ‘elation followed by disappointment’ or, if the order is reversed ‘despair counteracted by optimism’ (Bannerman, 2014, p. 70). These features, coupled with music, language, setting, frame the dance as a narrative.

The analysis of shows that, while each participant chose to represent a personal story that they cared about, there were several points of contact between them. Many seemingly decided to narrate stories that started with trauma or weakness, and that ended in acceptance, growth, or liberation. These stories also made use of the landscape of Perugia as a place that the dancer’s body adjusts to, and ultimately seems to conquer. The following section will show how their complex multilingual and multimodal repertoires – including words and gestures that have entered their repertoires in the course of their long journeys, or during their involvement with *Bouge-Toi!* – were mobilized to give tangible form to these narratives.

Bouge-Toi! videos are mostly devoid of language, although in a few cases the movements are accompanied by words – coming from the background music, or spoken by the dancers themselves. A particularly interesting case in this sense is Video #3 (<https://vimeo.com/242164137>), by Abdoulaye and Oumar. At the beginning, Abdoulaye dances with slow, ample gestures going constantly back and forth, not to music but to a French monologue, which is in fact Abdoulaye reciting the lyrics of the song ‘Lampedusa’ by Ivorian reggae artists Ismaël Isaac and Mokobé. This is a first-person narration of a young African man who decides to leave and try his luck on the Mediterranean rather than being stuck in a land devoid of opportunities. The song starts playing as Abdoulaye walks on a pier towards a body of water, lunges forward, looks back, covers his face, as a hand appears from outside the screen and rests on his head. He walks forward, keeps looking back once or twice until he reaches the end of the pier and looks intently at the body of water.

The choreography conveys an idea of looking back while moving forward, and there is little doubt that Abdoulaye's movements intend to index (see Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003) the Mediterranean passage through his body and its position in front of the water. However, they take their full meaning only in relation to the French words. Abdoulaye chooses to use untranslated, and even untranslatable French: there is an untranslatable pun in the song as the singer claims that it is better to die at sea (*mer*) rather than feeling shame in front of one's mother (*mère*). The two words are homophonic in French, but not in Italian, and the wordplay would be lost on a non-Francophone audience. Linguistically speaking, Abdoulaye is asking the host society to meet him on his own terms, while in dance terms he has combined the type of music he would normally dance to (West African reggae) with a grammar of movement provided by *Bouge-Toi!*. Abdoulaye draws from different parts of his multilingual/multimodal repertoire. This reflects his complex "lived experience of language" (Busch, 2017), as he combines the type of 'choreographic writing' that he has learned from Romito in Italy with the French of his upbringing. In being mobilized, elements from the repertoire are transformed as the words from a reggae song are made to fit the movements of his original, 'Italian' interpretive dance.

As theorized by Pennycook (2017) and recently reaffirmed by Kusters (2021), repertoires are not contained within a person, but they coexist with the surrounding landscape in an *assemblage* whose elements are mutually influencing each other. In Abdoulaye and Oumar's video, the landscape interacts with the dancer's movements and words, contributing to the full meaning of the video. The body of water that Abdoulaye stares at is quite obviously not the Mediterranean, but the Trasimeno lake: the landscape where Abdoulaye is now stuck in bureaucratic limbo – some 150 km from the nearest seashore and approximately 900 km from Lampedusa. Abdoulaye's French monologue and the narrative pattern of his movements possess meaning not only in themselves; but also in how he appropriates the lake, and the idyllic surroundings of green hills and medieval villages briefly shown in the video, to impose his own layer of meaning, his bodily memory and linguistic alterity, over the oblivious landscape.

Most *Bouge-Toi!* dancers who interact with the landscape of Perugia with their movements and words, do so in relation to what appears like a specific pattern of movement: the dancer falls and then stands, often in front of a historical landmark. Video #7 (<https://vimeo.com/showcase/4851814/video/242180336>), realized by Mohamed and Cédric, centres around Mohamed walking in Corso Vannucci (Perugia's high street) on a sunny day, visibly unsettled,

gesturing and mouthing hardly intelligible words, stumbling and almost hitting an uneasy passerby, and finally stopping to recite a poem in Italian, where he both acknowledges the help he received from Italy and urges Italians to be understanding towards migrants, underlining the bravery (“coraggio”) that it took him to undertake his journey from Mali.

Mohamed’s poem uses the language he has learned, not as a skill to be used in the job market but as a creative resource, to illustrate his simple and direct take on the refugee-host relationship. The true significance of the poem is however the way it complements the dance and interacts with the setting for the video. At the beginning, Mohamed is out of focus, almost indistinguishable from the background. As he comes into focus, the dance appears almost like a faltering walk, giving the impression that he does not occupy that space with confidence, in turn generating uneasiness in those who walk near him. It appears to exemplify an uneasy relationship between the asylum seeker and the streets of the town. After he recites the poem and speaks up his mind, however, Mohamed walks purposefully, with confidence. The video acquires full meaning if we consider the place where Mohamed is: Corso Vannucci, a central street of Perugia, usually reserved to shopping and tourism. The alternance of movements and words (see Kusters 2021) creates a narrative pattern that goes from destitution to confidence; but it is their interaction with the setting that truly communicates Mohamed’s claim to be accepted in Perugia.

Lamine and Sangaré in Video #6 (<https://vimeo.com/242176439>) use hip-hop to provocatively address their relationship with the urban landscape of Perugia: the video shows Lamine stumbling and falling down; as he gets up, and stands firmly on his feet, a hip-hop track with a heavily upbeat electronic base starts (‘May 24h’ by Meidai). Lamine puts on imaginary headphones, ‘scratches’ on an imaginary DJ set and sings into an imaginary microphone following Meidai’s rapping. Lamine brings movements that are typical of hip-hop – which presumably were part of his repertoire before *Bouge-Toi!* – into a narrative structure that he has created with the help of his dance teacher. Quite notably, at the end of this process, the camera revolves quickly around him to reveal that he is standing in front of the Oratorio di San Bernardino, a fifteenth-century chapel. While he does not address the chapel directly in the dance, his actions and his body’s position seem to claim his role as a legitimate interlocutor of Perugia’s landscape, in confrontation with one of the historical landmarks of the town.

A strikingly similar narrative pattern can be observed also in Video #15 (<https://vimeo.com/showcase/4851814/video/242279452>), realized by Precious and Leonardo. The video is significantly called ‘Balance-Equilibrium’, and it shows Precious getting back on her feet after

falling down in a dark alley of the Medieval town – as she rises, the camera turns to show the bright green glow of an Umbrian landscape which had been behind her the whole time. At the end of each routine, the dancer (Lamine in #6, Mohamed in #7, Precious in #15) always seems to occupy the space of Perugia with greater awareness and confidence.

The videos analysed here express similar claims with different tones and intensities, as Abdoulaye, Lamine, Precious and the others occupy different historic spaces in Perugia and invest them with fresh meaning that comes from their own trajectories of migration and the semiotic resources that they have accumulated so far – including the dance styles that had generated diffidence at the beginning of their engagement with *Bouge-Toi!* These combinations of movements and (occasionally) words not only function as part of an entanglement (Zhu, Otsuji, & Pennycook, 2017) between the dancers and the environment around them: they actively represent a creative response to that environment, which affirms the dancer’s ability to function as a credible interlocutor.

7. Conclusion

The starting point for this article is the experience of a group of asylum seekers in Italy, a small sample from the approximately 183,000 individuals who were hosted in refugee hospitality centres in 2017 (Villa et al., 2018, p. 12). The interviews set out to discover the role that a dance-based workshop had on their experience of linguistic integration, and what type of creative representation of their predicament emerged out of the relationship with the project organizers. The responses reveal a complex relationship with the space of Italy – which is a space of discovery as well as forced immobility in hospitality centres. In this situation, an asylum seeker’s often rich linguistic repertoire becomes obscured as he or she attends Italian classes in the name of linguistic integration. Taking part in the *Bouge-Toi!* project enabled the participants to explore different semiotic resources that an individual may use together with, and in substitution of, language.

It is tempting to see dance as an activity that, by not requesting practitioners to speak, enables easier intercultural communication than other language-based activities, such as creative writing. The interviews reveal, however, that this relational success is the result of long negotiations and misunderstandings, where dance repertoires can be as different from each other as linguistic repertoires. Far from being a ‘universal’ language, dance proved to be a highly codified mode of expression, where the preeminence of contemporary European dance initially reinforced the

participants' impression that this was 'white people's stuff.' Gradually, through practice and proximity, and the sharing of a multilingual space, these tensions were reduced and bonds were formed: when I interviewed them, months after the end of the project, Pierre* and the others were still friendly with Romito and Dubroca, who were an important part of their social network together with other *Bouge-Toi!* participants.

The project's artistic output, moreover, reveals the ways in which the participants ultimately managed to combine the methods of 'choreographic writing' with several elements from their semiotic repertoires. The fact that the videos were set in Perugia and featured interactions between the dancers and the landscape also helped the students reconceptualize their relationship with a landscape that they inhabit so precariously. Language – and especially Italian language – loses its central importance in the brief timespan of each video, becoming one tool among others (postures, looks, gestures, costumes, objects) that the dancers use to conceptualize their relationship with Perugia. The new meaning that is created goes beyond a national discourse portraying refugees as threats or victims, but rarely as expressive subjects rightfully inhabiting the landscape. The artistic endeavour brought the individuals outside of the reception centres and enabled them to interact with historical settings as performance sites to translate their own narratives of the trajectory into dance, and enter in dialogue with the space of the town with a new role.

In the following months of 2017 and 2018, the videos were presented at several local events, with the help of schools, cultural associations, and activists. In these presentations, Pierre* and the others had a chance to speak and see themselves (and be seen) as performers and communicators. This does not mean that they have escaped the rigid bureaucratic and political constraints of the asylum process; rather, working on *Bouge-Toi!* enabled them to create their own aesthetic interpretation of those constraints, and provided a platform to present this interpretation to the local public.

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