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The essay explores how the French-Algerian choreographer, Rachid Ouramdane, absorbs the theme of torture into his works. As a practitioner of documentary dance, Ouramdane uses the testimony of torture victims and their families to generate movement that resonates with the trauma, rather than representing it mimetically. In two works that focus on torture, Loin [Far] of 2008 and Des Témoins ordinaires [Ordinary Witnesses] of 2009, Ourmdane raises questions concerning the limits of violent acts, where they begin and end, and how they create reverberations both in the body and the psyche. The essay follows his choreographic practice, examining how he builds his dances on professional and non-professional dancers to reflect their lived experience. In particular, the essay studies how the movements generated in the context of a response to torture return in other works based on the phenomenon of murmuration, also characterized by the transmission of shaped energy.

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Reverberating Violence, Visibility, and the Dance of Rachid Ouramdane

Until the twentieth century, concert dance steered clear of depicting violent acts directly on stage, unless they were highly aestheticized. A dance would either keep such acts offstage, or allude to them in a multiplicity of inventive – but always theatrically distancing – ways. However, as Donia Mounsef has observed, twentieth- and twenty-first-century performance modes – in particular, dramatic theater and body art – have integrated violent acts more overtly into repertoires of staged movement.[1] Since the medium of dance and the medium of physical violence are one and the same – the body – and since our exposure to scenes of violence has become increasingly frequent, it is inevitable that twenty-first-century choreographers would attempt to find movement equivalents for the violent acts that are so much a part of both our personal and public lives.

Torture is an extreme form of violence that produces injuries of a highly complex nature, combining the personal and the public, the psychological and the somatic, the arbitrary and the systematic. Torture is usually inflicted in an officious way (often by representatives of state authority), and yet can be experienced as acutely individualized, something directed at the most intimate parts of the subject's body, inducing psychological states such as humiliation and shame.[2] Torture is stored as visceral memory (leaving physical as well as emotional scars), and it is archived as historical memory (sometimes leading to trials or codifications). The choreographer whose work I will be exploring in this article, Rachid Ouramdane, has made torture the explicit subject of two of his dance works, raising questions for audiences and dancers alike concerning the limits of torture, where it begins and ends, how it resonates through the body and

the psyche, and how it moves outward to affect other bodies and psyches across generations.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 (revised in 1977) – which forbid all instances of torture (in vain, tragically) – define torture as one of several forms of inhumane treatment that "willfully cause great suffering or serious injury to body or health."[3] The perpetrators of torture, as scholars have documented, often find a kind of perverse satisfaction, an outlet for their creativity, in concocting new ways to degrade, grind down, and injure a person, presumably to gain a piece of information or extract a confession.[4] There can be an aesthetics of torture, a theatrics of torture, and yet, in most cases, the goal is stated to be efficacy, not beauty or drama. It is easy to cite instances of torture in films, both documentary and fictional; however, it is not something we often see performed on a concert dance stage. How could a choreographer represent in a dance such a violent, repressive, and inhumane act? And could a choreographer prevent that representation from becoming over-aestheticized? How might the impact of an act of such violence as torture be captured in movement, released to resonate, and yet maintain its critical effect?

Rachid Ouramdane, a Franco-Algerian choreographer, has tried to do just that. Torture is the explicit theme of one of his earliest choreographies, the solo *Loin* [*Far*] (2008), and is also featured in a dance for five dancers, *Des témoins ordinaires* [*Ordinary Witnesses*] (2009), a work based on his interviews with victims of torture from many sites around the world. Ouramdane has made it clear that he has no interest in *showing* a real act of torture; and yet, unlike choreographers who reference violent acts but do not take them as a major theme, he wants us to know that these dances are *about* torture and its wide-ranging effects. The experience of torture victims informs both *Loin* and *Des témoins ordinaires* from start to finish: to

create *Loin*, Ouramdane conducted an extensive interview with his mother about his father's experience of torture during the Algerian War; and before the rehearsal phase for *Des témoins ordinaires*, he collected testimony from a wide variety of victims and archived it via video and voice recordings.[5] As he explains in an interview about *Des témoins ordinaires*, when "confronted with such stories [those recounted by victims of torture]," he felt the need "to construct images" that developed out of his relationships not only with the direct victims of violence but also with the people close to them.[6] What he heard during the solicited testimony became the origin not of a narrative dance but rather of sonic, scenic, and gestural icons. In the case of Ouramdane's creative process, the semiotic term "icon" is appropriate, because he manages to evoke a discernable resemblance or affinity between the staged movement, figure, sound, or image, on the one hand, and, on the other, the violent act these staged elements are intended to evoke. Yet, there is no pre-established, conventional relationship between the act and how it appears onstage. Thus, it is not, for Ouramdane, a question of mimesis; instead, the recorded accounts of violence executed on bodies and minds act upon him to generate a chain of associations leading from an element of the testimony to what is, for him, its sensory or affective equivalent. They are reverberations, in him, of what he has heard, seen, and imagined. For instance, in *Loin*, a fan rotating slowly on the stage floor suggests a surveillance strobe; a trailing set of wires evokes the application of electric shock; the sound of a waterfall recalls waterboarding. On the level of movement, in *Des témoins ordinaires*, a rapidly spinning woman, her back arched to an extreme degree, corresponds with the protracted distortions of the suffering body, while a man curled into a fetal position captures the sense of powerlessness and exhaustion described by the victim in an interview, an excerpt of which

provides part of the dance's score.

As Ouramdane notes, the experiences of torture victims are "often said to be ineffable, unimaginable, or unthinkable" – and, therefore, presumably resistant to representation.[7] Sometimes the victims have trouble speaking of their experiences, or even knowing precisely what happened. Hence, Ouramdane has to use all the resources of both the live and the pre-recorded arts to reiterate and reproduce for members of an audience the experience he has when hearing about and imagining these violent scenes. As I have proposed, what he seeks to theatricalize is less the violent act itself than its reverberation – not only on the victims but also on himself. His body (in *Loin*) or those of his dancers (in *Des témoins ordinaires*) serve as tuning forks, indices of reverb – the impress of violence on bodies as it travels across generations, continents, media, and languages. He seeks to "offer a visual and sensorial experience [of the victims' bodies]" in the temporal texture of stage time, bodies that he imagines "collapsing and knitting together again."[8] It is notable that Ouramdane's privileged image for the experience of violence involves a release-and-catch (or "fall and recovery") movement pattern.[9] Bodies "collapsing and knitting together again" are at once dance's fundamental core (losing and regaining balance), the plangent material by which dance leaves it mark, and, in the context Ouramdane fabricates, a figure ("image") for the body's reaction to forces beyond its control.[10]

Typically, Ouramdane identifies a rhythm (e.g., "collapsing and knitting together again"), a kind of diastole/systole of violence as it produces a response on one body, or as it ripples through one body and passes to the next. We can see this clearly in a scene from *Loin*. At the beginning of the 51-minute choreographic installation, Ouramdane, his back to the audience, is listening to his mother recount what she remembers of her husband's time in the army – first in Algeria, then in Vietnam. In the film version

[see *Loin*, CLIP #1], as his mother speaks, Ouramdane is watching the projection of a watery surface on a large rectangular screen to backstage left; later, the water will be replaced by an intense close-up of his mother's face. In between, we see him lift what appears to be a small light to his face. As he moves his head slightly up and down and to the side, we see projected on the screen an image of his face covered in black-on-white camouflage make-up, tilted in the same direction. As the mother tells her son about his father's episode of interrogation and torture during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962),[11] he, too, appears to be interrogated by the hand-held light. The details of the means of torture used – they would "shock him with electricity to make him talk"; he was "tossed in the air" from the force of the shocks; they cut off his foot in prison – are told in a quiet, calm, almost monotone voice. We learn further that her own father was killed by the French, her uncle was killed by the French, and that "the [French] Legion… killed everything, even the chickens."

During the mother's monologue, the imprint of these atrocities seems to shift from the parent's face to Ouramdane's own. It is he who appears in the mirror, covered in make-up imitating the camouflage pattern. Although there is no actual blood shown on the stage, the blood spilt by his father is alluded to symbolically by the flat pools of shimmering black liquid dispersed on the Marley floor, thick enough to reflect the stage lights. As Ouramdane rotates his face, the speakers situated on the floor also rotate; behind his upright figure, we see a filmed scene of a waterfall rhythmically rippling down.

Rachid Ouramdane, *Loin*, 2008 (clip #1)

In another segment [see *Loin*, CLIP #2], Ouramdane responds to the account of his father's suffering by repeating in slow motion a pattern that consists of descending to the ground, rolling, and rising up again. In the background we hear a single guitar strumming (the music is by Alexandre Meyer), faint singing in what might be Vietnamese (Ouramdane traveled to Vietnam, where his father had been stationed, to collect imagery for the piece), and the sound of the projected waterfall.

Rachid Ouramdane, *Loin*, 2008 (clip #2)

In a further episode [see *Loin*, CLIP #3], after hearing the testimony of a young Vietnamese American boy about his family's suppressed memories of war, Ouramdane dances to harsh, heavy-metal music. Here, he executes spasmodic arm, back, and head gestures, tossing out hands that seem astonishingly white when juxtaposed against his all-black, hooded attire. The back-and-forth movements that echo the rhythms of the earlier phrases grow smaller until they conclude with a simple nodding of the head, back and forth, back and forth, as though signaling the word "no."

Rachid Ouramdane, *Loin*, 2008 (clip #3)

In 2008, when *Loin* was made, Ouramdane's dance vocabulary was still largely influenced by his early years as a hip-hop dancer in Nîmes. Over time, he would integrate more of the modern dance technique he had received while studying at the Centre Chorégraphique d'Angers under the direction of Nadia Croquet in the early 1990s. His mature technique is informed by choreographers he has worked with over the years, among them Emmanuelle Huynh, Alain Buffard, Odile Duboc, and Meg Stuart. However, the isolations, the fluid upper-body curls, and the emphasis on inverted weightlessness we see in *Loin* are more reminiscent of virtuosic street dance styles than modern dance technique. The acclaimed choreographer, currently Director of the Théâtre de Chaillot in Paris, still integrates elements of this corporeal archive of an earlier self into his vocabulary. (However, *Loin* reflects his earlier training and preoccupations to a greater extent.)[12] Ouramdane's choreographies, whether or not they explicitly address migrant and refugee experience, often juxtapose the "contortions" required of classical ballerinas and modern dancers with the "contortions" of hip-hop dancers and practitioners of extreme sports.[13] Although the two styles cannot

be separated in any definitive way, in *Loin* especially they can be seen to stand for two different aspects of his identity – the child of North African refugees who borrows from street dance moves, and the professional dancer trained in one of the premier French conservatories.

In *Loin*, Ouramdane is clearly seeking to understand his own divided self – through his own family's experience, first of all, and then through that of other second-generation migrants and refugees who, during the performance, recount on a pre-recorded soundtrack their disorientation, their sense of placelessness, and their struggle to find an identity capable of integrating a silenced past. The theme referenced by the title – farness or distance – is thus evoked in several ways. The second-generation migrants express their sense of alienation, their temporal and geographical distance from the events that have so profoundly influenced their lives; distance is also suggested by the long, winding road displayed on the screen during the monologues; finally, distance is the condition of exile itself. All the interviewees live far away from their families' homelands (in the US or France). And yet, as the effect of reverberation suggests, that which seems "far" away is not so far away after all. The wartime violence experienced by the older generation still reaches deeply into – causes reverberations in – the individual lives of the children.[14] *Loin* is therefore a register of the reverberations of extreme violence as it passes down the generations, like an electronic signal, a wavelength transmitted through wires or causing one of the rippling cascades that we see onstage.[15]

Ouramdane's 2009 choreography, *Des témoins ordinaires*, follows in this wake, bringing together five performers to interpret movements inspired by interviews Ouramdane conducted with refugees from Brazil, Chechnya, Rwanda, Palestine, and Chile. The piece takes place on a dark stage

emptied of everything except a bank of lights and a plugged-in electric guitar swinging from the fly tower, its incessant, gnawing buzz recalling the resonating instrument of a hanging body or an instrument of torture. This sequence is followed by others in which dancers collapse in slow motion or open their bodies in exaggerated arches as though surrendering, making themselves vulnerable and prone – either as witnesses who testify or as victims rendered passive and defenseless.[16] *Des témoins ordinaires* and *Loin* aim to represent in movement form – to echo in their own imagistic language – what the philosopher Elsa Dorlin has referred to as a "phenomenology of violence."[17] By this phrase, she is pointing to the lived experience of – or, to evoke Frantz Fanon, "the fact of" – racialized oppression as it is manifested psychically, physically, and behaviorally. In her recent work, *Se défendre, une phénoménologie de la violence* [*Self-Defense: A Phenomenology of Violence*], Dorlin studies how governments and other organs of power "intervene at the muscular level"; "the target of this art of governing," she writes, "is the nervous system [*l'influx nerveux*], muscular contractions, the tone [*tension*] of the kinesthetic body, the discharge of hormonal fluids."[18] Although, in Ouramdane's dances, we frequently see bodies expressing the violence inflicted upon them at what Dorlin would call the muscular level, these are *choreographic* manifestations; they are the products of training and invention, not spasmodic reflexes. The danced figures of *Des témoins ordinaires* are, again, not realist representations but attempts to respond to state-imposed forms of oppression through a kind of sensory osmosis. Ouramdane's dancers ride the shockwaves and snag the reverberations of pain, confusion, alienation, and traumatic memory that traverse the body and "intervene" in its postural and gestural conditioning. If, in *Loin*, Ouramdane seems to be locating the reverberations of (his father's) suffering on a single human body (his own), in

Des témoins ordinaires, he reaches into his rich store of extreme and prone postures, and twisted, off-balance turns, to "show on stage," as one commentator has put it, "torture and its wounds," to "express the memory of such things."[19] But what is "shown," what choreography makes visible, is not a scene of torture – or, in another context, a scene of police brutality; instead, what we witness is the slightly delayed echo, the reverberation of violence as it is displaced from one physical form to another.

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I would submit that many (if not all) of Ouramdane's creations are choreographies of reverberation. I have already given two examples, *Loin* and *Des témoins ordinaires*, both of which offer iconic images of violence's impact while framing these images by means of a plethora of situating information (such as pre-recorded interviews, videos of landscapes, the recitation of poems) which allows them to be legible as a form of critique. However, in other dances – and again, throughout his career – Ouramdane displays an interest in reverberations of an entirely different order. He has choreographed what I will call "nature studies," choreographies based on the repeating patterns of crowd behavior, both animal and human, or group pieces focused on movement relay. He demonstrates an interest in a wide variety of movement types insofar as they are affected by the impact of external forces. For instance, he employs the voluntary and aestheticized movements of the virtuosic dancer; voluntary but everyday movements such as walking and running; the highly trained and specialized movements of acrobats and practitioners of extreme sports; as well as involuntary movements, such as those performed when bodies are pushed or thrown.

One important area of this type of movement research concerns the collective behavior of birds in flight: *Murmuration* (2017) is named after the avian phenomenon of synchronized flight routes, the swooping, spiraling, and turning patterns that characterize the large-scale group behavior of starlings, for instance. It is easy to discern a resemblance between the murmuration of birds and the synchronized but just slightly staggered repetitive movements that Ouramdane observes in human group behavior patterns and that he recreates when representing, for instance, the martial training of police (in *Polices!* [2013]), the serial exercises of acrobats (in *Möbius* [2019]), or the interlocking gestures of athletes (in *Corps extrêmes* [2022]). In all these instances – from the migratory patterns of birds to the rhythms of people walking down the street – Ouramdane studies and invites us to see how a corporeal impulse passes from one body to the next, how individuals are interconnected, co-impacted, part of a larger ecology of gravity, wind patterns, social conditioning, or, as in the two dances with which I began, the state's use of force.

Ouramdane's interest in group movement patterns is particularly visible in *Polices!*, a choreographic response to the exponentially increased police surveillance put in place after the rise in terrorist attacks in "hexagonal" France. In the clip I have included here, groups of performers, clothed in bright orange or blue, walk back and forth on a stage that evokes the hallways of an airport or other similarly impersonal public spaces. A female voice-over addresses the ubiquity of anti-terrorist militias and surveillance devices placed in such spaces. Single performers stop for no apparent reason, leaning slightly forward as though about to take the next step, then advance again in response to the touch of another performer. The walking figures create indecipherable but readily recognized patterns, as though they were birds swooping in murmuration, or, alternatively, part of

the formation the French call a "brochette de policiers" – a string of policemen stationed in self-protecting, vigilant rows.

Rachid Ouramdane, *Polices*, 2013 (clip)

While many of Ouramdane's choreographed solos accentuate the stylistic idiosyncrasies of a specific performer, his group work dilutes individuation, submitting all dancers to a vocabulary of gestures that can be complex and virtuosic (such as the seemingly endless repetitions of a difficult turn sequence) or simple and ordinary (such as the lifting of an arm or the turning of the head). All choreographers tend to develop their own vocabulary of postures, gestures, steps, and figures; they have a recognizable visuo-kinetic style built from what their own body can do, their training(s), and what they have observed in their dancers. Like a *bricoleur* in Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense, a choreographer works with a set of actions as though they were materials, combining and permuting them for different occasions.[20]

Whereas a dance figure such as the slow roll on the floor in *Loin* could be construed as an attempt to represent the choreographer's visceral reaction to hearing of his father's suffering, it can also become an element of a vocabulary, one of a set of materials with which to construct other dances, having nothing to do with that specific instance of suffering. Inevitably,

image-signs of this nature are semiotically malleable; that is how dance functions as a poetics. The terms of dance gain referential power by means of their tonicity, the velocity and dynamics of their performance, but also through the scenic and verbal frames in which they are performed. Ouramdane's works show us how a danced image-sign can become highly evocative and charged with pathos within a certain scenic context; but they also show us how that same image-sign can shift its meaning and impact when placed in a different scenic context.

To give just one example, in 2018, Ouramdane turned his attention to the subject of forced migration, the "crise migratoire" accelerated during the Syrian war. *Franchir la nuit* [*To Cross the Night*] is based, like many of his works, on extensive interviews, this time with youths exiled from their native lands, seeking asylum in Europe. Ouramdane traveled with the piece, mounting it each time in a different city with a different group of young migrants that he assembled, interviewed, and directed during a preparatory workshop for the specific performance. Although each resulting piece would employ a new cast of migrants, the consistent presence of professional dancers in the troupe ensured that they – and not the migrants – would determine the tenor and the choreographic language of the work. That is, instead of integrating the movements the migrant youths themselves generated, Ouramdane relied on collective routines he had used previously in dances such as *Tordre* [*Twist*] (2014) – holding hands and walking in a circle around a central figure; *Tenir le temps* [*To Hold Time*] (2015) – dancers lifting and carrying one another in syncopation; and *Sfumato* (2012) – dancers rolling in a shallow basin of water placed upon the stage.[21] Certainly, he incorporated types of movement he had not used before, such as the staggering run that begins the piece and that reflects in a mimetic mode the weary pace of a migrant trying to escape across a border; however, he does not seem to have worked from his own visceral experience of hearing the

migrants' narratives or watching how they move. The displacements via reverberation that I described earlier are less palpable in *Franchir la nuit*; the movements are not charged in the same way, and thus do not provide the same visuo-kinesthetic experience for the viewer. The message of *Franchir la nuit* is clear – that the violence done to migrants and refugees is unacceptable – but the lack of ambiguity impoverishes the piece and attenuates its resonance. We do not find the same richness of image-signs that we find in other pieces, in part, perhaps, because the situation did not encourage their invention. That is, the fact that Ouramdane was working with a constantly changing cast at a new site likely did not permit him adequate time to observe and absorb the gestures and words of individual members. Therefore, he might not have been able to pick up the reverberations *in his own body and sensibility* of the "wounding" that had occurred to theirs.

This is not a criticism of *Franchir la nuit* so much as an observation of how reverberation works. In *Loin*, the use of spoken language accompanies and enriches dance phrases and scenic choices that are equally rich. In *Franchir la nuit*, the soundtrack appears to do more of the work. Invariably, in Ouramdane's explicitly political or topical pieces, the human voice is an extremely important – and potent – element of his scenography. Whether pre-recorded or live, voices and haunting music tracks frame the phrases that he and/or his dancers perform. To a degree, then, it is this framing that ensures the dance will be interpreted as a form of cultural or political critique. But the verbal frame can only partially determine how the work will be publicly received. It is worth considering Jacques Rancière's challenge to overtly political art as articulated in *The Emancipated Spectator*, a challenge aimed largely at identity politics but also at aesthetic theories that assert the directly referential nature of artworks. In the book, Rancière argues that an artwork is only contingently political in that it

solicits responses it can neither predict nor control. Following Duchamp's dictum – that the spectator completes the work – Rancière argues that an artwork is not necessarily political or critical in the way the author might have intended it to be. Unless the work excludes ambiguity entirely and emulates propaganda, it will live its life independent of its creator's intentions and, eventually, without relying upon the historical context from which it emerged.[22]

According to this logic, even artworks that attempt to represent, to render in visual terms, an act or an experience of violence may end up eviscerating their own impact. This would be especially true if those artworks relied on instituted signifiers, clichéd figures that are highly legible to an informed audience able to "read" the "text" of the dance, so to speak, as though each danced figure corresponded via a one-to-one relationship to a precise act or feeling. Popular cinematic representations of horrific or genocidal events (wars, ethnic conflicts, the Holocaust, and enslavement – as different as they are) too often fail for a similar reason: they fall into the trap of seeking an aesthetic communication that is more concerned with the communication than with the aesthetic. And ultimately, as Ouramdane's work shows, it is the aesthetic that offers a deeper experience of violence, one that can motivate a compassionate response. The magic of Ouramdane's *Loin* is that it forges its elements from felt displacements of violent acts; it studies violence from the perspective of the reverberations it creates in a single and singular person. Those elements – the fan, the voice-over, the lighting, the costume, the video track, the recitation, the movement – interact. They are reverberations reverberating with one another, not in an empty echo chamber but in a room with an audience present to absorb and process them.[23] There is, of course, no way to know how the audience *will* process them, but that is precisely the futurity, the not-yet-institutionalized and thus not-yet-*fixed* quality of the aesthetic. The unknown variable

of audience response, the addressee or "interpretant," is the aspect of the artwork that allows for the next visceral reverberation to occur.[24] It isn't a matter of transmitting violence, or even the experience of violence, but rather of providing some kind of displaced experiential equivalent of its effect, a figure for its resonating impact.

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In conclusion, I'd like to return briefly to the phenomenon of murmuration. I suggested earlier that Ouramdane's interest in the way a movement impulse can travel from one body to the next is a constant of his work. In *Mobiüs*, for instance, movements are passed along like the baton in a relay race: the movement one dancer performs is rapidly retraced by the next dancer, in a long series, creating the kind of wave-like patterns we see in the murmuration of birds. In *Polices!*, one dancer touches another to set off an identical series of steps, at the same pace and often in the same direction. Shaped energy is thus visibly displaced from one body to the next. In *Corps extrêmes*, dancers thrown into the air produce a similar, spring-like dynamic in the subsequent group of dancers who have caught them. These are all instances of ricocheting forces, effort expended that causes the expenditure of more effort, similarly shaped. In this sense, movement is motivating; it engenders more movement, more response. This phenomenon could serve as an apt analogy for violence and the way it comes into view, again and again and again.

When studied in abstraction, outside of a historical, political, geographical, or environmental context, murmurations, group behaviors, and resonating bodies all exhibit the play of politically neutral *physical* forces. When placed in dramatic situations, however – that is, when staged with props and a soundtrack – the phenomenon of reverberation, of the body's echo of what it has seen or experienced, is capable of evoking a political reality,

or even a specific scene or event. In closing, then, we might well ask: what are the conditions that determine how we view a set of movements – as abstract patterns or as meaningful utterances? What is the difference between the spinning of a dancer in, say, Ouramdane's *Le Secret des oiseaux* [*The Secret of Birds*] (2019) – which I would categorize as a "nature study" – and the spinning of a dancer in *Des témoins ordinaires*, a dance that explicitly treats the theme of torture? Both dances feature the same dancer, Lora Juodkaite; both feature the asymmetrical rotating spin that Juodkaite originated and for which she is famous. Juodkaite's signature movement was a contingent element Ouramdane added to the piece: watching Juodkaite execute that spinning motion (without first being instructed to do so), Ouramdane saw its potential, then integrated it into his choreographic repertoire. In the earlier dance, *Des témoins ordinaires*, Juodkaite's spinning appears as part of an assemblage of elements (including the costuming, lighting, voice-over, promotional media, and playbill text) that frame the movements we see as similar to the distortions caused by acute suffering. In *Le Secret des oiseaux* the spinning is also framed, of course (by, for instance, the red costume, the title, the music), but in ways that do not invite us to interpret it as "a visual and sensorial experience" of suffering. That is, that same dervish-like motion is *not* introduced as one of Ouramdane's figures deployed to capture the reverberation of violent acts as they have been recounted by torture's victims.

Earlier, I used the word "icon" to describe dance images such as Juodkaite's rotating, off-kilter spinning. I suggested that there is a "discernable resemblance or affinity" between image, on the one hand, and, on the other, the violent act it is "intended to evoke." Insofar as this resemblance exists, dance images are a particular kind of sign – iconic to the extent that, under certain conditions, they can resemble what they signify, but not conventional, not "instituted," in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

Under different conditions, the same image might not serve the same function. For a movement-as-image to serve as the sensory or affective equivalent of something else – in short, for it to *resemble* – a host of other elements must be in place. Writing about the problem of visual movement literacy, or how the intention of a moving body can be interpreted when viewed, Judith Butler has suggested that movement (and here, she addresses filmed movement in particular) is always seized within a "field of visibility" – that is, within a given set of assumptions, or framed by a stable set of elements. To be perceived at all, in other words, the movement needs to be perceivable from a particular point of view.[25] She bases her argument on a very particular instance: the reaction of jurors during the trial concerning the beating of Rodney King. According to Butler, jurors from different social situations responded in highly contrasting ways to a video made by George Holliday of Rodney King's beating at the hands of Los Angeles policemen in 1992. Butler maintains that the filmed movements of both King and the police officers beating him could be, indeed were, read in more ways than one; how a person interpreted the gestures of King and the officers depended on the "frame of intelligibility" through which they were viewed. Some jurors who watched the video saw clearly that King was attempting to defend himself; others, with a view "saturated" (in Butler's words) with a racializing perspective, saw King's movements as constituting an attack on a group of defenseless policemen.

I mention Butler's notion of a "frame of intelligibility" in order to underscore that our ability to interpret – more, to *feel* – a set of movements as meaningful in a certain way is, at least in part, contingent upon the parameters of the "field of visibility" in which we view them. Of course, some important distinctions need to be made: Butler is writing about a video documentary filmed spontaneously by an eye-witness of a real event that took place on a city street; in contrast, the dances I have been discussing

contain thoughtfully crafted phrases produced by an individual choreographer over a considerable period of time, to be performed on a stage. Still, Butler's point is worth entertaining. It may be, to gently riff on André Lepecki, that choreography is not an apparatus of capture, but that the frame within which choreography is performed is.[26] The movement elements as they are strung together choreographically are not like the words of a vocabulary; they do not impose consistent meanings or unproblematically refer (as though words ever do!). Rather, movements are materials that respond to the reverberations of other materials, and to audience expectations as well. They do not "capture"; *they resonate with and pass on*. Accordingly, the scenic elements of *Loin* can be considered to be a kind of assemblage of capture, but one that is porous to the spectator's construction. The assemblage requires interpretation – not only in the intellectual sense but also as absorption in the somatic sense. The sonic, visual, and kinetic elements in all their nuances – the tones of color, the degrees of darkness, the pitches and volume of the voices, the effort qualities of the movements – combine to suggest to the perceiving body of the spectator the reverberation of an event as it has passed through Ouramdane's perceiving body.

And yet, I wouldn't want to suggest that the meaning and impact on us of a danced movement – its reverberation in us – is determined solely by the contingent "field of interpretation" in which it is presented. When we say that dance movement is in itself abstract and meaningless (or highly plastic, able to assume many meanings), we end up denying aspects of our visceral experience to which we should attend. I believe there are movements that clearly transmit a singular affect; to deny that is to risk becoming a sociopath. At least, that is what Ouramdane's choreography suggests. For instance, when we watch his body respond to violence by falling to the floor in a heap, or when we watch a person in "real life" reeling from a blow, it is difficult not

to wince – that is, it is difficult to prevent ourselves from responding instinctively by recoiling, feeling concerned or afraid. Governed by a law similar to the laws of physics, we view or hear – in short, we are affected by – an act of violence, and are likely to become conduits of the reverberation of that violence, either physically or psychically. We incarnate that act; we inherit, so to speak, and produce something from it, such as an indexical wince, an iconic gesture, or a conventional verbal sign that we use to describe it. Dance movement partakes of all these registers of reverberating incarnation. The "frame of intelligibility" is, in short, not the only thing that imposes meaning on movement; there are, I believe, movements that can never be entirely abstracted from their social – perhaps even biological – meanings. They require no frame to create their reverberations. Or, to use another vocabulary, there may be movements that are not differential, the impact of which cannot be explained as a result of their place in a system of signs.[27] That is one of the many reasons why dance movement is so difficult to describe in semiotic terms, despite the efforts of numerous wise and inspiring theorists (from Mallarmé to Patrice Pavis, from Rudolf von Laban to Sally Ann Ness).

Violence is, without doubt, a particularly affecting phenomenon, one that creates reverberations capable of reaching far out in space and time. And torture, as the Geneva Convention points out, is an extreme form of brutal violence, a form that makes the personal historical, the intimate political, a form that blurs all boundaries in between. It is not surprising, then, that when Ouramdane began his choreographic career with such a potent subject – the torture of his father during the Algerian War – the phenomenon of reverberation, of the felt experience and subsequent expression of another's movement, would become a major focus of his later choreographic research. The phenomenon of reverberation is featured not only in his dances specifically about torture or other forms of victimization

and injustice; the phenomenon of reverberation is also featured in dances that simply trace the displacement of energy from one body to the next. In this way, Ouramdane's dances may be considered studies of intersubjectivity – that is, explorations of how we are all affected by the other's moves.

1 Donia Mounsef, "Violence, vraisemblance, et bienséance: corps souffrants, corps effarants dans le théâtre et la danse contemporains," *Revue Krypton* no. 5/6 (2015), 260–269.

2 The recent cases of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and the photographs that were circulated about the techniques used there, provide ample evidence that humiliation, degradation, and other forms of primarily psychological violence are also acts of torture. Rachid Ouramdane refers to these cases in an interview at *Des Témoins ordinaires* [*Ordinary Witnesses*]: https://www.journal-laterrasse.fr/des-temoins-ordinaires/.

3 See: Geneva Convention IV, Article 147: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-147#:~:text=Grave%20breaches%20to%20which%20the,suffering%20or%20serious%20injury%20to.

4 See, for instance: Melanie Collard, *Torture as State Crime* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La Torture dans la République 1954-1962* (Paris: Minuit, 2000; 1962).

5 Frédéric Pouillaude has written about artworks that integrate testimony or other forms of documentation, calling them "*représentations factuelles*" in a book of the same name, *Représentations factuelles* (Paris: CERF, 2020). He distinguishes between choreographers who integrate witness testimony and documentation specifically solicited for theatrical reprisal (and, sometimes, manipulation) and choreographers who use pre-recorded and/or archived materials; Ourandame belongs to the former category. See also: Jess McCormack, *Choreography and Verbatim Theatre: Dancing Words* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

6 Rachid Ouramdane, "Poétiques du témoignage: Entretien réalisé par Barbara Métais-Chastanier le 5 juillet 2011" (my translation): https://journals.openedition.org/agon/1779.

7 The literature on the representation of the unimaginable, or the unspeakable, is

abundant and rich (around the Holocaust and chattel slavery in particular); I will not try to summarize it here. In contrast, the literature on the representation of suffering in dance is less voluminous. Felicia McCarren's *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) sets the gold standard. Lucille Toth's recent *Danses et pandémies: Du sida à la covid-19* (Montréal: Varia, 2022) is also an excellent study of choreographers who have treated disease and suffering in dance. For research on depictions of violence associated with war, see: *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, eds. Gay Morris and Jen Richard Giersdorf (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Ouramdane, "Poétiques du témoignage."

9 Doris Humphrey, one of the most significant contributors to modern dance technique, taught "fall and recovery" as a fundamental choreographic unit. See: Doris Humphrey, *The Art of Making Dances* (New York: Rinehard, 1959).

10 It should be noted that the word "figure" plays a special role in dance scholarship, referencing a movement or series of movements that constitutes a gesture, a unit of significance for the performer and/or the audience. "Image" is a word too closely associated with static portrayal; "figure" denotes a spatial design in time.

11 The exact chronology of the torture is not given in the mother's monologue. Some details are provided by Alessandra Nicifero in: "Questioning the Truth: Rachid Ouramdane's Investigation of Torture in *Des Témoins Ordinaires/Ordinary Witnesses*": according to her, Ouramdane's father was a career soldier in the French Army, who fought in World War II and later in Indochina, but deserted during the Algerian War and was imprisoned and tortured by the French Army. Interestingly, the mother's account is not so straightforward: she states first that her husband enlisted, then jumps forward to when he was stationed in Sidi Samian for a month, and then in Tilaf – presumably at the start of the Algerian War. Following this, she tells her son that his father was arrested and forced to spend two years in prison – we are not told why. Only later does she refer to his activities as an enlisted soldier during the 1940s and early 1950s: "He told me we fought them off, we attacked, we won, we went all the way to Indochina."

12 Ouramdane's most recent project, his first as Director of the Théâtre de Chaillot, employs practitioners of extreme sports such as rock climbing, in *Corps extrêmes*. Excerpts can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otc7Hhr-njY&t=17s.

13 See: https://www.paris-art.com/des-temoins-ordinaires/.

14 For work on transgenerational trauma, see: Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

15 On the use of electronics in *Loin*, see: Ashley Ferro-Murray, "Dancing the Hardware: Rachid Ouramdane's Embodied Performance," *Media N*: http://median.newmediacaucus.org/art-infrastructures-hardware/dancing-the-hardware-rachid-ouramdanes-embodied-performance/.

16 The indefinite article of the title, "Des," evokes the notion of impersonality and the category of the average, common, or "ordinary citizen"; the French expression "spectateur ordinaire" suggests the ordinariness requested of a person serving as a juror in a trial, for instance.

17 See: Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre: Une philosophie de la violence* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017). This work is forthcoming in English translation as *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence* by Verso Press.

18 Dorlin, *Se défendre*, 17 (my translation).

19 *Les Inrockutibles*: https://www.theatreonline.com/Spectacle/Rachid-Ouramdane-Des-temoins-ordinaires/27474.

20 Dance is a series of actions, but it is also a series of signs, or rather, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, "an image that has come to act as a sign" and thus is "already permutable, that is, capable of entering into successive relations with other entities, even if these are limited in number…" Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," in: idem, *Wild Thought: A New Translation of La Pensée sauvage*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 21.

21 This is to be contrasted with Lucille Toth's choreographic/therapeutic piece, *On Board(Hers)*; for this project, Toth leads a workshop with each group of female-identified migrants and refugees, deliberately and thoughtfully generating the dance vocabulary from the gestures they offer: https://www.onboardhers.com/description.

22 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso, 2009).

23 The empty "echo chamber" is a figure I borrow from Gerald Siegmund, who writes in "Aesthetic Subjectivity: The Politics of Art as a Situation" that "identity-political concerns" in art "require identification with a specific social and political agenda" and

that this identification is reifying: "Art then would really be partial, only ever addressing peer groups that share the same beliefs and views on the world, thereby stabilizing preconceived options like reverberations in an echo chamber." Unpublished paper delivered at the 2022 Dance Studies Conference in Vancouver, 3. I thank Professor Siegmund for sharing his valuable work with me.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on "institution" are pertinent here; see: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique* in *L'Institution, La Passivité, Notes de cours au Collège de France* (1954–1955) (Paris: Belin, 2003).

25 Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in: *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 15–22: 15. Mark Franko reminds us in "The Readymade as Movement: Cunningham, Duchamp, and Nam June Paik's Two Merces" that there is no such thing as "movement in itself" – there is always a discursive frame surrounding the movement we see (in: *Choreographing Discourses*, eds. Mark Franko and Alessandra Nicifero [New York and London: Routledge, 2018)]. I also direct readers to Felicia McCarren's *One Dead at the Paris Opera Ballet: La Source 1866–2014* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), which formulates the question of context in highly productive ways.

26 See: André Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture," *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:2 (Summer 2000), 119–123.

27 For a longer meditation on "abstraction" in dance, see my *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

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