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Pace, Michelle

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# Overcoming Bordering Practices Through the Arts: The Case of Young Syrian Refugees and their Danish Counterparts in Denmark

Michelle Pace

Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark

## ABSTRACT

During 2014, Denmark received nearly 15,000 asylum seekers, almost twice the number from the previous year as more people fleeing Syria's war fled to Europe. By 2016, Denmark succeeded in making the country highly unattractive as a destination for refugees fleeing war torn countries. The country introduced a controversial 'jewellery bill', placed adverts in a newspaper in Lebanon dissuading refugees from contemplating a trip to Denmark, and cut assistance benefits for refugees by half. These state bordering practices aimed at securing some kind of 'Danishness'. This article aims at ascribing agency to young Syrian refugees in Denmark, who have experienced these bordering practices and who seek to counter these practices by participating in meaningful social interactions with their Danish counterparts. The empirical focus is an artistic enactment—a weeklong dance workshop that brought these youngsters together as a distinct form of practice that brings about the conditions of possibility for meaningful integration. Conceptually, it draws upon Arendt's theory of action and notion of 'plurality' to frame how such encounters come about.

## Introduction

During 2014, Denmark received nearly 15,000 asylum seekers, almost twice the number from the previous year as more people fleeing Syria's war fled to Europe. When a centre-right government took over power in 2015, the country cut assistance benefits for refugees by half, took out advertisements in a newspaper in Lebanon—where hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees had fled—to discourage them from seeking asylum in Denmark (Taylor 2015), and, on January 2016, the Danish parliament approved the controversial 'jewellery bill'—which allows immigration authorities to confiscate valuables from refugees in order to cover the cost of their accommodation (Pace 2016). In early 2017, the Danish government announced it would re-impose border controls to combat illegal immigration and smuggling. The government said the new measures would be carried out in line with the European Union's

open-border Schengen Agreement. In spite of all these Danish government measures, many refugees have met welcoming, open-minded and helpful Danes. However, during March 2016 the country's former children's ombudsman and a well-known author, Lisbeth Zornig, was fined DKr 22,500 for allowing a family of Syrians to hitch a ride with her to Copenhagen (Crouch 2016). Denmark has succeeded in making the country an unattractive destination for refugees, while sending a strong message to its nation: Do not try to help refugees! These exclusionary practices of the Danish government are aimed at securing and governing the economic welfare and identity of its citizens. These practices are what Van Houtum and Van Naerssen have referred to as bordering practices (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002), in other words, practices of othering, ordering and the discursive differentiation between 'us' and 'them'.

The Danish state's bordering practices, by which I mean formal policies of rigidly applied tools and techniques to create a homogenous citizenship, comprise assimilation strategies vis-à-vis refugees. According to the International Organisation for Migration, assimilation refers to the 'most extreme form of acculturation' whereby it

will lead one group to be socially indistinguishable from other members of the society ... Adaptation of one ethnic or social group—usually a minority—to another. Assimilation involves the subsuming of language, traditions, values, mores and behaviour or even fundamental vital interests ... Although the traditional cultural practices of the group are unlikely to be completely abandoned ...

By assimilation, I here refer to specific controls by a host country government to move a minority group from the border to the centre. By integration, I refer to organic social interactions between refugee and host communities that (preferably) are not engineered by any controlling power such as a government or other official body/ies.

The purpose of this contribution is to ascribe agency to young Syrian refugees in Denmark who have experienced these bordering practices and who seek to counter these practices by forging meaningful social interactions with their Danish counterparts.

Conceptually, it does this by drawing upon the work of Hannah Arendt and in particular her theory of action and her notion of 'plurality' (Arendt 1969). In her work *The Human Condition*, Arendt explores the fundamental categories of the *vita activa* (labor, work, action, corresponding to the three activities of our being-in-the-world). Action is for Arendt one of these core categories of the human condition: it constitutes the highest realisation of the *vita activa*. Through her writings, it is clear that action is what distinguishes human beings from the life of animals and the life of the gods. Freedom and plurality are the two central features of action. Arendt interprets freedom as the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected, with

which all human beings are endowed by virtue of being born. Action or the realisation of freedom is therefore rooted in the fact that each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty into the world. For Arendt action needs plurality in the same way that performance artists need an audience. Action can only be meaningful with the presence and acknowledgement of others.

Empirically, it focuses on an artistic enactment—a weeklong dance workshop which culminated with a dance performance as part of the Roskilde lights festival and that brought together young Syrian refugees and Danes as a distinct form of practice that brings about the conditions of possibility for meaningful integration. My thinking is here influenced by the literature on arts and geopolitics, migrants and theatre, borders and theatre, especially the work of Ingram, Bhimji and Strüver, amongst others (Bhimji 2016; Ingram 2016; Strüver 2004).

It is important to highlight from the beginning that as the sample size used in this research is rather small, this article is of an exploratory nature and by no means aimed at making any firm conclusions. What it does though is to hopefully point the way to further research in the area of integration of refugees into host societies.

Through personal empirical investigations I conducted, this article will shed light on the challenges and opportunities that the state techniques of assimilation offer for young Syrians. This article uses the concept of assimilation for Denmark's bordering practices for two reasons. Firstly, because, as highlighted earlier, real integration of immigrants into a host society requires a dual, two-way approach where on their part the hosts take on broad elements of the immigrants' culture while immigrants are 'permitted' the space and fluidity to adapt to the host culture, for example, by learning the language.

However, as will be developed below, this fluid interaction between host society and migrants often creates conflict between some sections of the Danish population and some sections of the migrant community. Therefore, and secondly, I use the concept of assimilation rather than integration because assimilation is precisely the term that is popular among supporters of the Danish People's Party and also implicitly or explicitly adopted by the centre-right government. Since 28 November 2016, Denmark has a new coalition government composed of Prime Minister Rasmussen's centre right or Venstre party and the Liberal Alliance as well as the Conservative People's Party. Under the new coalition, the government remains in the minority with 53 seats and still depends on the support of the anti-immigration Danish People's Party in parliament to pass legislation (The Local 2016). Assimilation in Denmark, much like in France (Brubaker 2001), is therefore a one-way approach, where immigrants are expected to assimilate Danish culture and leave their origins behind. This is not so surprising a sentiment among a majority of Danes due to the fact that Denmark—historically speaking and until very recently—was one of the most homogenous societies in the world.

But, other factors, such as the state of the Danish welfare system today (Frederiksen, Larsen Jørgen and Torbenfeldt 2015), come into play as well and will be further elaborated on below. I draw upon the work of Hannah Arendt in order to reveal how subverting such bordering practices in Denmark follows from her notions of plurality and action.

In concluding, this contribution asserts that the Danish government's bordering practices continue to emphasize cultural homogeneity and the importance of universalistic structures and ideological presumptions about the Danish welfare state. In spite of these measures, possibilities for subverting these same practices exist.

### **The Refugee 'Crisis': Geography, Space, Territory, Ideology and Extreme Right Parties**

The above mentioned interventions by the Danish state can be read as attempts at spatialising Denmark's sovereignty at the border (Appadurai 2003; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Kuus and Agnew 2008). Key sites such as tent camps for refugees have materialised which should help us understand Denmark's practices of sovereignty through borderwork. But, while the Danish government has sought to funnel refugees seeking asylum through particular routes or indeed to encourage them not to take the journey to Denmark, refugees on the move, have themselves sought to subvert the Danish state's authority through the use of new technologies and social media which ensured their safe passage to Danish territory.<sup>1</sup> The field of border studies has seen many scholars probe the geography, space and territorial implications of the latest wave of people on the move as well as related governments' and non-government organisations' techniques of controlling these movements across borders.<sup>2</sup> In his 2006 piece on 'The Lines that continue to separate us', David Newman attempted to set out a new agenda for border studies by emphasising a bottom-up approach to the study of borders, which sheds light on the agency of individuals experiencing borders as borderland and transboundary transition zones (Newman 2006; see also Popescu 2012). The agency of people on the move as they encounter their hosts is still, however, under-researched if at all. In fact, such an encounter is often overlooked in border studies debates and it is for this reason that I turn to Hannah Arendt's work on plurality as a way of filling this gap in the academic literature. Following David Newman's suggestion, this article aims to critically analyse developments in (the context of Danish) migration, refugee and asylum policy that, in spite of constituting barriers to refugee movement and communication with host societies can also potentially constitute bridges and points of contacts between these two groups. In so doing, this article aims to discuss, whether such meaningful encounters can be conducive to de-bordering practices.

## Subverting Border Practices: Hannah Arendt on Plurality

In this contribution, I take Newman's call for a bottom up approach to border studies, which allows me to provide agency to young refugees who experience othering practices by the Danish government and to analyse how they seek to subvert these practices.

I focus in particular on Arendt's theory of action in which she articulates a conception of politics that, in a similar fashion as Asef Bayat's notion of politics (Bayat 2013), is based on the idea of active citizenship. In this way, I take young refugees in Denmark as active citizens even if their permission to stay in Denmark is of a temporary nature (own interviews with young Syrian refugees, October 2016–February 2017). Arendt's work offers an original and fresh approach through which: a) we can address questions of identity and meaning (how do young refugees in Denmark make sense of their Self in their new environments?) and b) through her notion of participatory democracy, action can be interpreted as a way of human togetherness. (How do young refugees in Denmark seek to subvert the bordering practices imposed upon them by the Danish government's policies?)

Hannah Arendt lived through and witnessed deep transformations in Europe as a result of two world wars. Her thinking was marked by these experiences. Arendt thus brings a particular take on 'action' as praxis that she links to two core features: freedom and plurality. For Arendt: 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting' (1969, 9). To act in the world therefore means to disclose one's self and to be able to do the unexpected. Arendt gives several examples, one of which is the French Revolution. In this case, she argues that individuals (men and women) interrupted their routine acts and had the courage to create a public space for freedom to emerge and were thus a source of inspiration for the future. Such action for Arendt gives meaning to the lives of individuals. But, for Arendt one cannot act alone—in isolation from others.

Hence, she also introduces the concept of plurality as the second core pillar of action. Action requires a plurality of actors. For Arendt then plurality requires both the presence as well as the approval of others for action to be meaningful. Arendt defines plurality as 'the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world,' and emphasises that plurality is the condition of human action 'because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (See Arendt 1969, 7–8). For Arendt then, plurality is both about what makes us equal but also what distinguishes us from one another. Therefore, for Arendt it is communicative interaction that sustains the web of human relationships (See Arendt 1969, 178–9, 184–6, 199–200. See also the

work of Norval [2007] on this point). The answer to the question of every newcomer ‘Who are you?’ is thus found in both action and speech. Thus, through both words and deeds, ‘the who’ is disclosed but both words and deeds are interdependent: Agency can only be ascribed through speech and action. Arendt distinguishes the ‘who’ from the ‘what’ the latter referring to people’s abilities and talents. One of Arendt’s most important claims is then that the actual meaning of action is therefore dependent upon our audience and on those who narrate our story. The audience of people’s actions is thus the political community who is affected by the action of and the value and importance that active citizens give to their civic engagement (Sheldon Wolin 1977). And because of the innovative importance that Arendt gives to each action she represents a staunch critic of all forms of political community that are based on traditional customs/ties, including those based on ethnic, racial or religious identity.

It is the above notion of participatory democracy that I take from Arendt to shed light on the ways in which young Syrian refugees in Denmark are exploring new openings to encounter their Danish counterparts as ways in which to subvert the bordering practices and politics that characterise Denmark’s migration and integration policies today.

### **Background to Denmark’s Bordering or ‘Assimilation’ Strategy**

Denmark, like other Scandinavian countries, is a small, highly developed nation based on cultural homogeneity and social trust (Hedetoft 2006; see also Jenkins 2011). Traditionally, it has cultivated a self-image of tolerance. A universalistic welfare state—based on high levels of public provisions (health care, education, unemployment benefits, old-age pensions, etc.), accessible to all citizens and residents in the country—has been developed, since World War II. The system is rooted in ideas of social egalitarianism, but also on the assumption that citizens earn their entitlements by contributing (through taxation) over a lifetime of active work to the maintenance and growth of the national wealth (Bo Kaspersen 2005).

These welfare structures entail both a significant amount of state intervention (or as Jones and Johnson refer to it—a re-articulation of state sovereignty) (Jones and Johnson 2016) in the social domain and economic redistribution across social groups. Cultural belonging and political rights are thus intertwined, and ‘equality’ is interpreted to mean both: ‘cultural similarity’ and ‘political sameness’ (in regards to civic rights). The benchmark of ‘successful assimilation’ has always been one of successful individual inclusion and acculturation to the mores of Danish life, since the Danish political system—unlike the systems of other Nordic countries—does not base itself on the recognition of minorities and, only in exceptional cases, makes juridical or political allowance for minority rights and cultural claims based on minority status.



In this sense, Denmark is similar to France: egalitarian, secular, and assimilationist. John W. Berry defines acculturation as the process whereby ‘groups of people and their individual members engage in intercultural contact, producing a potential for conflict, and the need for negotiation in order to achieve outcomes that are adaptive for both parties’ (Berry 2005, 697). In this way, Berry recognises both the cultural as well as the psychological aspects inherent in human interaction which is based on conflict and negotiation. Historically, although Denmark was usually not regarded as a country of immigration, it did experience Dutch, German, Polish, Swedish and Jewish groups of immigrants from the early sixteenth century. All groups gradually assimilated into every day Danish life. But it was mainly the inflow of Germans between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries that left an imprint on Denmark’s development as a modern state (See also Schmidt 2016). The first successful attempt at addressing the issue of German minorities after the second world war came with the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations of 1955. These declarations guaranteed the rights of the minorities both north and south of the border and the freedom to choose their nationality—crucial steps towards complete equality. These declarations also contributed to popular attitudes in regard to minorities that perceived minorities not as a threat but as a cultural enrichment to society (Pedersen 2000). Today 15,000 people belonging to the German minority live north of the Danish-German Border in North Schleswig. This minority has its own schools and a number of social and cultural institutions and serves as a crisscross between German and Danish cultures.

Over time, however, and with the specific ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, the two historical staples of homogeneity and equality have come to be seen as obstacles to assimilation. During September of that year, Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, announced that Denmark would accept 1,000 of the asylum seekers in the European Union’s quota system. But, he underscored the voluntary nature of the proposal, which still needed the Danish Parliament’s approval, because Denmark’s EU opt-out frees it of any obligation to participate in the EU system, hence reasserting Danish sovereignty on these matters. Rasmussen also announced an allocation of an extra 100 million euros to tackling the crisis. Thus, at the same time, both citizens and political actors started to focus on (and often ideologically exaggerate) the financial ‘burden or cost’ newcomers place on the welfare system.<sup>3</sup> Immigrants are now seen as an unwelcome presence because cultural assimilation has been more difficult than originally expected. By November 2016, Inger Støjberg—Danish Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing, an immigration hardliner—announced in the Danish parliament that the government had suspended a programme to receive around 500 refugees per year through the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) indefinitely stating that: ‘It will give the municipalities a little breathing space and room



to better take care of those who have already come here' (Agence France Presse 2016). In this way the Danish state continues to use sovereignty as a political instrument (Parker and Adler 2012), as migration policy and border 'security' programmes are reworked.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Danish people's attitudes towards immigrants has been changing rapidly back and forth of late—with a more positive and welcoming feeling during autumn of 2015 then turning to a more negative attitude than ever quite quickly thereafter (Byager Rabøl 2016).

Consequently, negative stereotypes of immigrants have become common: Refugees are routinely branded as 'welfare scroungers' or 'refugees of convenience' who unfairly take advantage of a system that was never intended for their benefit (Zucchini 2016). Immigrants from the non-Western world, Muslims in particular, have become singled out as objects of disparagement, whereas Danes are, in general, far more open and welcoming toward immigrants from the EU and other Western countries. These kind of discourses are thus creating the very political community that Arendt was so critical of: one based on traditional customs and ties, especially those based on ethnic, racial or religious identity. And, in turn, Denmark's boundary drawing affects refugees' feeling of belonging (Bakkaer Simonsen 2016).

Things got worse with the double 'terror attacks' in Copenhagen in February 2015, when Omar El-Hussein, a Danish citizen of Palestinian origin, first fired several shots at a free speech event, killing one, and then killed a volunteer security guard outside of Copenhagen's Great Synagogue. Omar El-Hussein was born and bred in Nørrebro, an immigrant area in Copenhagen. Reports suggested that Omar had a deep loathing for Denmark and led a life full of anger (Higgins and Eddy 2015).

In January 2016, the Danish government approved a new, tighter immigration law, which increased the period refugees must wait before applying for family reunification to 3 years. According to an Overseas Development Institute report, family reunification and safety are the paramount aspirations of Syrian refugees—whether in neighbouring countries or in Europe (Bellamy et al. 2017). Moreover, most middle class, well-educated Syrians have discovered that it is possible to find jobs in Denmark as cleaners, but not as qualified professionals (own interviews 2016). But, they hasten to add that they are helped a lot by everyday Danes. Once granted asylum in Denmark, many refugees make contact with the Venligboerne ('Friendly Locals') initiative—a movement started in November 2014, when 485 refugees arrived in a small town in Jutland in Denmark. This movement was organised entirely by a spontaneous group of volunteers, who got together to build up a help and welcome network for all those asylum seekers. Mads Nygaard worked for an asylum centre in Hjørring where, along with eight others, he co-founded Venligboerne. This local community inspired a global movement of mutual help and cultural exchanges, through social media, numerous little acts of

support and generosity, and free coffee. The Venligboerne movement has now spread all over Denmark, and has gained international recognition. It grew exponentially all over the country during 2015 as the refugee flow, and publicity surrounding it, became the major news event of the year. Using Facebook as a communication platform, Venligboerne enables citizens to donate furniture and clothes, organise social events or offer other practical help to refugees (Bannock 2015). In addition to Venligboerne, Refugees Welcome (<http://refugeeswelcome.dk/en/>) offers asylum seekers free legal counselling and assistance, seeks to ensure the rights of refugees and informs the general public about the conditions for refugees in Denmark.

With the increasing imposition of cuts in the traditional welfare sectors—for example in September 2015 the Minister of Children, Education and Gender Equality Ellen Trane Nørby and the Minister of Education and Science Esben Lunde Larsen announced that the Danish education sector will no longer be ring-fenced in government budgets and thus universities face a 2% cut in their budget every year over the next 4 years (Rychla 2015), politicians do not seem to realise that Denmark will need more immigrants in order to cope with these cuts plus its ageing population (Euromonitor International 2015) and to ensure a sufficient supply of skilled as well as unskilled workers required for a sustainable economy. The increasing embedded element of public control of higher education and the welfare sectors more generally, together with the control of refugee asylum and assimilation policies (hence the re-instating of state sovereignty), do not bode well for a country historically known for its tolerance and social egalitarianism. Considering that strongly held views of cultural incompatibility between Danes and immigrants characterise public debates, the overall conclusion must be that there is a pressing need for more far-sighted, flexible, sustainable and visionary social interaction policies in Denmark. In a sense, the Danish approach to ‘assimilation’ must recognize the challenges and propose a way to deal with them. However, in November 2016 the government announced its plans to increase its contribution and involvement in NATO’s collective defense, thus clearly demarcating lower priority to its welfare sectors and political and civic assimilation of refugees and host communities (Gronholt-Pedersen 2016).

This strategy hampers the incorporation of refugees into the Danish political system and jeopardizes institutions that work towards ensuring socioeconomic trust and equality. Traditionally, such institutions in Denmark have been critical in maintaining social peace and political consensus.

It is for this reason that this contribution now delves into the reality of what refugees in Denmark experience once they reach the country. The following is therefore a very personal account based on my observations and interviews with young refugees and Danes from September 2016 until March 2017.

Before doing that, I will briefly account for the methodological approaches and challenges that I faced. Researchers within the broad area of migration and refugee studies are aware of the methodological challenges in this context (Block et al. 2013; Pernice 1994; Schweitzer and Steel 2008). For my project (detailed below), I work mainly with young Syrian refugees between the ages of 11 to 18 and their Danish counterparts, mentors/guardians/pedagogues of the young refugees, psychologists working in Non-governmental organisations like the Red Cross who also work with young refugees, officials from municipalities who are responsible for young refugees, artists working with young refugees and educators. The personal baggage that young Syrian refugees and young Danes bring with them to the interview context is clearly different so the starting point for the interviewer and interviewee is very different when interviewing young Syrians and then separately when interviewing young Danes (representing the host, receiving society). Although I have some working knowledge of Arabic and Danish, it was necessary for me to be accompanied by a translator who could assist in both Arabic translation to English (for young Syrians who preferred to conduct the interview in Arabic—their mother tongue) and in translation from Danish to English (for young Danes who felt better speaking in Danish than in English to the interviewer). Hence, there is the question of linguistic challenges in particular regarding the interpretation of the translator and how this is then transmitted to the interviewer.

Another challenge that I met during the interviews held relates to the matter of sample size for the project. I relied on a network of contacts for access to young Syrian refugees and young Danes who interact with these refugees. Moreover, since the subjects of the interviews are minors a priori consent had to be sought from those responsible for minors—in the case of the young unaccompanied Syrian refugees their guardians and in the case of young Danes their parents. Thus far I have interviewed/observed nine young Syrian refugees and four young Danes in the Roskilde municipality. Being aware of the need to observe etiquette and the nature of the vulnerability of the interview subjects, I did not use a questionnaire as a guide to interviews. Instead, I have appropriated my questions starting with asking young Syrian refugees in Denmark how each one feels about their stay in this country thus far and eventually dig into how they arrived here, why they chose to come to Denmark, and then furthering their reflections on what kind of social interactions they find meaningful. Using ethnographic observations (a social science research methodology that studies people's behavior in everyday contexts. Data is gathered through observations and/or relatively informal conversations) as well as interviews, I then allow the conversation with my subjects to develop in such a way that the research process itself maximises the benefits for the involved participants, while reducing potential harms.<sup>5</sup> For instance, when subjects become emotional and express their emotions through crying, the interviewer calls upon the

subject's guardian to confirm whether it would be best to stop the interview or to take a break from it. The interviewer also took up these instances with the young refugees' guardians thereafter ensuring that the *kommune* (or municipality) responsible for these vulnerable young people provided adequate therapeutic counselling for them as and whenever needed.

Through informed consent from the subjects' guardians, I thus ensure that participants can enhance their personal capacities and also adapt my research methods to heighten the relevance of the circumstances of the subjects' lives and their engagement in my research. Permission was also granted to me to have some of the interviews video recorded as a short documentary film has also been prepared (using key direct quotations from the subjects interviewed) about their experience of 'subverting the Danish government's bordering practices'. What is important for me is that by promoting ethical practice and methodological validity throughout the research process of my project I wish to highlight how ethical reflexivity throughout can help resolve the methodological challenges that I described above. I also want my research outcomes to be useful and rigorous beyond academia and well into the policy making community.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that it is quite challenging not to get involved, when subjects break down in front of you, while interviewing them. One has to be fully aware of the potentially harmful impact of fieldwork on the researcher (See for example Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). Thus, I am cautious about not 'going native' and of taking care not to become too involved in the young Syrian community under study. Accepting that it is rather impossible for a researcher in this field to remain neutral or impartial, I have been in constant conversation with the young refugees' guardians and their therapeutic counsellors on how best to empathise with my interviewees as part of my response to their emotions. This in turn helps to develop and sustain a bond between interviewer and interviewee, as well as to build confidence and trust. In this way, I used reflexivity to locate my Self and observe how I interacted with my participants throughout the research process. Thus, I felt better equipped to position my Self in the process and thus enhance the ethical integrity of my research on dislocation as well as the subsequent analysis and interpretation of my data.

The next section will go into more detail about the specific project that I have been involved in.

### **Denmark's Bordering Practices: The Process of Refugees' 'Assimilation' into Danish Society Today**

Since, September 2016, I have been working on a project funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark under its FACE programme—the Fund for Academic Cooperation and Exchange between Denmark and the Arab World. This project entitled *Change in Exile: Re-invigorating Principles of Reform and Social Stability amongst Young, Syrian Refugees in*

*Denmark and Lebanon*, aims to strengthen collaboration between Danish and Middle East and North African (MENA) academics and practitioners by producing knowledge on the role of education in promoting principles of democracy and reform among Syrian refugee teenagers in exile. The research focuses on formal and non-formal education as avenues for strengthening social stability and cohesion in host communities in Denmark and Syria's neighbouring countries—mainly Lebanon—that host the majority of these refugees. What I produce below is a summary of our findings in Denmark so far from this project. From our research, it is clear that young Danes, in the main, have an open mind about young Syrian refugees. Young Syrian refugees in Denmark on their part are very keen to get to know and establish social relations with their Danish counterparts. In spite of the Danish government's bordering practices both young Danes and young Syrian refugees find ways in which to subvert controlling policies.

For the Danish part of this project, the majority of the young Syrian refugees interviewed arrived in Denmark during September 2015. Abud and his cousin Sabir,<sup>6</sup> both 17 years of age, were not exactly sure when they arrived in Denmark but they told me that it was approximately around the 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2015.<sup>7</sup> When I asked them why they chose to come to Denmark they told me that Denmark is simply a northern European country which is much richer and more stable than many other parts of the world, especially those in the Middle East, like Syria (where they came from), Yemen, Libya, just to mention a few. They told me they left Syria because they had to escape war. Abud also informed me that he has a sister who had been living in Denmark and that made it a more natural choice for him, while his cousin Sabir followed him. Sabir highlighted his wish that his whole family could find safety in Denmark. He described the long and difficult journey he under-took to come to Denmark and emphasised his desire to find a safe place to land in. 'We have seen death with our own eyes'. When I asked about the process of getting asylum once they reached Denmark they both agreed that they had not really cared about the process—what was crucial for them was to arrive at a safe place. But they explained how their fingerprints were taken upon arrival and they were eventually settled at Børnecenter Vester Thorup asylum centre (Sabir) and Centre Sandvad (Abud), which was run by the Danish Red Cross: some of the sites that have emerged as part of Denmark's practices of sovereignty (through border-work) since the 'refugee wave' of September 2015.

They had arrived at Copenhagen central station and had given themselves up to the authorities. They were initially taken to Centre Gribskov which was a centre for unaccompanied children. They then had to undergo a number of interviews and smiled when they told me that it was a matter of luck how 'speeded up' the process was. When I asked them how did Danes welcome them they told me they were received by 'normal' people: there was a

translator and they actually learnt English 'here in Denmark'. When asked what they meant by 'normal' they told me that their treatment was normal. They were asked far too many questions when the only thing they wanted was to rest after such a hard journey. They felt pressured and they were very afraid. They did not feel they got any time to rest from their journey.

Most young asylum seekers like Abud and Sabir travelled to Denmark on their own. The formal procedure requires each asylum seeker to first register at Centre Sandholm in Allerød. The Danish police then take a photo of the asylum seeker and take her/his fingerprints. The asylum seeker is then asked to state her/his name, date of birth, and country of origin. The police then issue an asylum seeker card, which serves as her/his personal identity. After the registration, asylum seekers are accommodated by the Danish Red Cross. This is an instance where humanitarian borderwork (Rumford 2008) steps in to alleviate the excesses of the state's violence of sovereign borders (Hindess 2006), but also becomes complicit in governing mobility (Pallister-Wilkins 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter, asylum seekers are summoned to fill out (in any language) a written asylum application with the Danish Immigration Service in Centre Sandholm or in the camp. Following this procedure, asylum seekers are summoned to her/his first interview with Danish Immigration Service where an interpreter is present (refugees.dk).

While Sabir told me he was fortunate enough to stay at his centre for only 4 months, others, he stressed, have not been so lucky: they could stay for up to 1 year or even more in an asylum centre. Abud agreed and said that he found the procedures extremely difficult and that they were not quick enough.<sup>9</sup> 'We have been suffering—it felt like we were under investigation for a crime ...'. They eventually arrived at a centre run by Roskilde municipality. I asked them how they felt at the time of the interview, more than 1 year since they had arrived in Denmark. Sabir liked the idea of coming 'somewhere else,' 'of integrating into another society,' 'of learning new traditions,' 'but we must remember we have our own traditions, values, etc.' Abud told me 'It is going better now. In the beginning it was hard, in the camp. Once we got to Roskilde municipality, we have had more opportunities. Bent<sup>10</sup> from Roskilde *kommune* organises events for us. We have organised trips .. but these trips are only for refugees ... We are of course restricted by the Danish language, but it is difficult to make Danish friends. Our mentors are very nice, but we would like to meet Danish youth our age ...'. Sabir continued: 'it seems to us that the *kommune* doesn't want us to intermingle with Danes .. we had this one off dance activity—a whole week's workshop where we met young Danes our age ... We might have misconceptions about each other ... I really want to mingle with Danish young people.' Abud agreed: 'The dance workshop was a very special activity. It brought young people together and we learnt about Danish culture and language. I go for boxing and swimming lessons but it is



not the same experience. At these sports clubs I just go and do my thing: I do not socially interact with young Danes at these clubs.’ I followed through the dance project that Sabir and Abud mentioned to me and met up with the two choreographers who were responsible for the workshop.<sup>11</sup>

When describing the planning of this dance workshop with mixed groups of young Danes and young refugees, Ellen (the Danish main dancer and choreographer/teacher of dance) and her Finnish colleague, Anu, explained to me that for this workshop they work with Roskilde *kommune* and the theatre Aaben Dans in Roskilde.<sup>12</sup> They had previous experience with such dance workshops through their collaboration with Odsherred *kommune* and Odsherred Teater. In these workshops the two choreographers focus on creating engagement between the youngsters involved through non-verbal connections or what they refer to as

embodied meetings at a basic but fundamental human level. When dancing together, we get a non-verbal, direct, detailed and subtle sense of the other. We open our senses and connect to each other, intuitively and playfully. We work with dance as a communicator rather than as a set of fixed steps one has to reproduce. Anu and I propose to our participants choreographic situations and different frameworks which hold the possibility for such embodied connections to take place, unfold and to be expressed poetically through dance (Ellen).

We have different approaches in our work: The first approach is what we call the game type task in the group: As humans we read others through movement. We work with this natural ability to read other peoples’ temperaments, intentions and state of mind through movement. And we work with a natural ability to respond to this information. We create games that invite possibilities for failure and lead to lots of laughter! We simply focus on the joy of recognising the presence of another person. You do something to me: We have an effect on each other (Anu). The second approach, we use is that of high energy work. We work with pushing, pulling, dragging, carrying each other, in duets, trios and sometimes with the whole group. The expression on faces when it works is priceless (Ellen)! Thirdly, we use our senses with closed eyes. With closed eyes we lead the other in different ways. We mirror each other’s soft movement and feel the other standing behind us or in front of us. This way of dancing together, lets you into another person at a subtle level and at the same time you connect to your own body sensations and feelings (Anu). Fourthly, and later in the process we set tasks where the young participants make little sequences, where they use some of the tools we introduce. The youngsters from Syria are generally very physical, strong, spontaneous and playful. The Danes are more careful to begin with and generally look for rules and structure. The combination of these approaches and the meeting between these temperaments produce an excellent climate for the dance we work with (Ellen).

We think of choreography as a way of creating structures that harness and express human energy and liveliness. We need equal amounts of energy and sense of structure. So this is a very potent combination of people. In these workshops Anu and I are not teachers but learners. We want to meet the other and widen our horizon through these dance meetings. We have a stake in these encounters and this is precisely when this work becomes meaningful for us (Ellen).<sup>13</sup>



Echoing Arendt, this dance workshop has thus offered young Syrian refugees the freedom to do the unexpected, to engage themselves in something new, a space through which a new way of bonding is created with their Danish counterparts. And, as Arendt reflected, this kind of action clearly gives a lot of meaning to these young people by acting together. Moreover, it helps them subvert the state's bordering practices, thus revealing the nature of integration over assimilation.

From the nine interviews I conducted, it is a common observation that all Syrian youth interviewed—both male and female—have a real urge to meet young Danish people. Ellen and Anu explain to me that they were very hesitant in the beginning about taking this task on as they were very critical that a week was not enough. But, as they had a similar experience with the Odsherred *kommune* before the Roskilde one, they took it on. In fact, while listening to Ellen and Anu, I was reminded of Arendt's theory of action and how these two female artists—together with Bent Hansen from Roskilde *kommune*—managed to interrupt the dominant and bureaucratic government narrative about refugees and instead engage in a courageous act that created a much needed space for young Syrians and young Danes to freely interact and to find meaning in their lives by being in that moment of the workshop and the dance performance.

Ellen and Anu further described to me in detail and as already mentioned in the long quote above how excited the Syrian and Eritrean youth from the Roskilde *kommune* were about the project and how much energy they brought into the workshop. The Danish youth were more reserved and not very sure about the ad hoc nature of the week's workshop. The latter group asked about what the outcome they were working towards would be and needed a clear framework and programme 'because that is how we too are programmed in our training and thinking'. The Syrians in particular were 'just enjoying every moment of it although there were quite chaotic moments when they just did their own thing, jumping on each other and putting on their Syrian music and dancing traditional Syrian dance during their breaks—which we eventually incorporated into the performance piece we presented by the group at the Roskilde lights festival on the Friday of that week at a church (the Skt. Ibs Kirke). The two (diverse) temperaments provided such a nice balance together'. When asked, what was the most notable impression they would take with them from the workshop they tell me that it was the way the two groups of youth came together as one when the audience came into the church (the chosen location for the eventual performance that came out of the dance workshop). 'It was really a very special moment. When the performance came to an end there was complete silence—it was clear that the audience was very touched and they wanted more, but we had not planned

anything for after the end of the performance'. The result in effect was a de-bordering practice of state bordering practices.

This observation echoes Arendt's notion of plurality as a core pillar of action. In this case, action requires not only the involvement of the young Syrians and Danes in a joint dance performance but it extends to their audience who act as judges of the quality of their performance. The triangulation of young Danes, young Syrians and their audience thus makes the dance performance a truly meaningful debordering exercise for all involved.

Ellen tells me, how the physical, emotional and mental all came together and helped the young performers release any anxieties and build trust relations. 'It was a very fluid practice to observe'. 'The Syrians in particular were physically very confident and spontaneous, the Danes more shy.' I asked them whether they had any say in the 'recruitment of the young Danes'. It was *Aaben Dans* (Open Dance) who was responsible for that. Anu explains how she observed the 'border' between the private and the public space between the two groups disappear as the week progressed. 'It was a very specific kind of *meeting* between these two groups of young people. The presence that each individual person brought into the performance was very powerful'. Ellen elaborates: 'We had this exercise where one person had to close his or her eyes and put his hand on the shoulder of his dancing partner and let the partner lead, while keeping his or her eyes closed so relying completely on your partner ... it was like 'undressing' in front of your partner and trusting your partner completely.' I also asked whether there were any moments of bodily resistance from any participant during the workshop. They told me of only one Danish girl who did not turn up after the first day and they were not sure whether it was due to illness and of one Syrian girl who informed them that she wanted to be matched with a female partner throughout the week. This resonates with Berry's recognition (mentioned earlier) of the cultural, as well as the psychological aspects inherent in human interaction which is based on conflict and negotiation.

Sabir and Abud told me that it would be very nice if this one-off dance workshop could be turned into a series of workshops that helped the young refugees meet and build relations and bonds with their Danish counterparts. Abud told me: 'At reception (Danish language) school everything is very formal. We cannot get together with young Danes in informal ways.' Sabir added: 'At school, we are pressured by the teacher to focus on our Danish. At the dance workshop, we had more freedom in a very informal setting.'

The emphasis of the Danish government's language and 'integration' courses for refugees has been to acculturate immigrants as speedily as possible by means of public control and regulation, and on extending egalitarian universalism to cover 'old' citizens as well as 'the newcomers'. It is worth keeping in mind that Denmark received only 370 asylum applications per 100,000 local population during 2015.

### **Rethinking Denmark's Bordering Practices**

Having shown specific evidence of how young Syrian refugees feel about the assimilation process in Denmark, it is now time to take stock of Denmark's bordering practices. As explained earlier, Denmark's benchmark of 'successful assimilation' has always been one of successful individual inclusion and acculturation to the mores of Danish life. The Danish integration programme that all refugees have to undertake for 1 to 5 years is clearly set up to achieve this objective from a Danish government point of view. However, as also explained above, young Syrian refugees do not find such programmes as conducive environments for them to learn about Danish culture and language. Their clear preference is for more informal activities such as the dance workshop that the interviewees introduced in this contribution spoke so positively about. The question then arises how can such art educational experiences be streamlined and introduced on a more regular basis in Danish municipalities responsible for young refugees' integration in to Danish society? This kind of programme falls in line with the notion of participatory democracy also introduced earlier here. So rather than focus on highly bureaucratic forms of refugee governing politics, the refugee 'situation' could be better managed if it was refugee-centred, and if it was designed as a long term policy rather than a short term one. Asger, a Danish youth who I also interviewed<sup>14</sup> stipulates that: 'All the shock that was introduced through the jewellery law and the adverts that the Danish government placed in Lebanon are all symbolic tactics and yes our government has managed to scare refugees away. However, from my personal experience we young Danes have a lot to benefit from social interactions with young Syrian and other refugees. Their experiences have clearly made them very hard skinned and we need that in Denmark, where we are so sheltered from the real world.' This resonates with Newman's call for a bottom up approach to border studies. It is the general public, civil society, educators and all front liners encountering young refugees on a day-to-day basis who collectively can subvert the Danish state's bordering practices.

## Conclusion

Denmark and a majority of Danes have to accept the fact that Denmark is not a homogenous society. Diversity is bound to grow, but in no way will this development 'replace' the Danish majority. If for a moment, we look at the way in which Canada is tackling its refugees strategy (albeit not a perfect model by any means), it would not take us long to realise that Denmark needs migrants to create a dynamic and young, economically active society in order to address working age population figures and pension challenges (See Bijak et al. 2007). A more positive narrative that sees migration less as a threat and more as a key opportunity is timely in Denmark.

Real integration of immigrants into a host society requires a dual, two-way approach where on their part the hosts take on broad elements of the immigrants' culture while immigrants are 'permitted' the space and fluidity to adapt to the host culture. The arts have a clear role to play in de-bordering practices and in positive integration efforts. The experience of the dance workshop explored in this contribution highlights how efforts such as these should be designed into the Danish integration programme adopted by municipalities, so that refugees and Danes have a sense of continuity in the relationship they are working to build between them. In other words, this would ensure citizens experience continuity. Such a programme would be very much in line with Denmark's once acclaimed notion of participatory democracy, which is under threat these days not least with the negative dominant narratives surrounding migrant issues. Successful cases such as those of Roskilde *kommune* should become benchmarks for other municipalities working on refugees' integration into Danish society. I am in fact working with Bent Hansen and a psychologist from the Frederiksberg municipality to build on our work together thus far and to create a platform for knowledge sharing and production across Danish municipalities. Our aim is to explore specific local policies as well as different practices across municipalities. The main focus is to create cooperation and coordination of actors (social workers in municipalities, pedagogues, psychologists and mentors) across sectors (education, housing, mental health, children, youth, adults and family) which will in turn enhance a transparent process and common understanding of possibilities and limitations in given sectors.

This requires, amongst other efforts, more active and ongoing interaction between municipalities and the arts sector in Denmark. Municipal partnerships with the arts and other sectors could be one way forward of bringing together not only these units, but can also be extended to include voluntary associations, civil society, labour organisations, educational establishments and private companies to take active responsibility for a better integration in their respective communities.

For academics, how to engage productively with the arts and aesthetic expressions in the context of migrants becomes a scholarly and policy-relevant imperative. This article has highlighted how the arts in fact have a clear role to play in de-bordering practices of the state and for active academic researchers of border and refugee studies this is a sector we need to pay much closer attention to. For, as Rancière puts it in his essay *The paradoxes of political art*:

within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. Own interviews with young Syrian refugees October 2016 – February 2017; see also (Popescu 2017, 1–10). Forum on Interventions on the state of sovereignty at the border, for more on the use of digital technologies by refugees.
2. See, for instance, Brown, 2010 and 2017.
3. This is not new of course: see Østergaard-Nielsen (2003), 448–454.
4. Gilbert (2017), 1–10. Forum on Interventions on the state of sovereignty at the border.
5. For more on the potential impact of fieldwork on researcher's interviewees see Jacobsen and Landau (2003), 185–206.
6. Abud and Sabir are not the real names of these two Syrian youth I interviewed. This precaution is taken to minimize the risks of harm to my subjects.
7. Interviews with Abud and Sabir that I conducted on Friday, November 18, 2016 at the Roskilde youth centre at Københavnsvej 106, Roskilde. Abud and Sabir preferred to have the interview in Arabic.
8. Pallister-Wilkins (2017). Forum on Interventions on the state of sovereignty at the border.
9. This interview and conversation occurred between the three of us, the author as interviewer, and Sabir and Abud as interviewees.
10. Bent Hansen is a special consultant in the Children and Youth Department at Roskilde Municipality.
11. Interviews I conducted with Ellen Kilsgaard and Anu Rajala Erkut, November 29, 2016 at Dansehallerne, Copenhagen. Interviews were conducted in English.
12. Aaben Dans is more than a theater. It is an arts organization that produces performances, organizes touring, engages in teaching, collaborations, festival organization, learning, sharing, co-productions and exchanges. It is located at Musicon in Roskilde.
13. The interview was carried out by the author with both Ellen and Anu present at the same time. It was more like an open conversation. Hence the long quotation.
14. Interview I conducted with Asger (not real name, to minimize any risks of harm to subject), Roskilde, September 10, 2016. Asger preferred to speak in Danish so I was assisted by a translator.
15. J. Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (Continuum 2010) Chapter 10 *The Paradoxes of Political Art*. Translator S Corcoran, 141.

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