

## Choreographing Deportation in David Herrera's *TOUCH*

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**D**eportations and the threat of removal are choreographic strategies of the nation-state's ever-growing monopoly of movement through border securitization and immigration enforcement, which persists into the twenty-first century. While literature and the visual arts have received critical and popular attention by considering forced family separations, dance remains overlooked. Analyzing dance performances that relate directly to deportation teaches us not only about the painful impact of forced removal: it instructs us to decode, move and maintain relationships as aliens and citizens amid the increasing control of motion in the United States and the cruel joke offered by a nation of immigrants.

Choreographer David Herrera's *TOUCH* (2015) explores the protracted feelings endured by undocumented and separated families. Told from a child's perspective, the performance emphasizes the severance of touch. It has a common dramatic arc in deportation stories: "illegal" migration, immigration enforcement intercedes, an unreconcilable painful separation, and a lingering psychic and social wound uniting families as they attempt to maintain connection. *TOUCH* is a sixty-minute performance divided into ten marked scenes of various lengths. Central to the performance's theme is the recurring visual motif of the dancers being partitioned by material borders: a sheer black curtain and properties created to resemble the Southwest border. This visual motif is accompanied by a movement motif of the nine dancers repeatedly reaching for each other. Herrera produced *TOUCH* by drawing on interviews with young adults in southern California who experienced family deportations, or may have had orders imposed, resulting in physical and psychic harm.

Building on Stuart Hall's (1997) notion of racialized regimes of representation, I contend, through an analysis of choreographies of deportation in *TOUCH*, that such regimes are linked with what I call *regimes of embodiment*. This refers to the way authorized power asserts control and monopoly over internalized, racialized bodily interactions and dominant touch scenarios and sensations. In regimes of representation, racialization processes operate through dominant signs, which create preferred meanings (stereotypes) through conceptual maps and linguistic systems that teach subjects how to look at difference. Like regimes of representation, racialized regimes of embodiment unequally shape and cultivate preferred movement meanings and habits. Power is consolidated through the control of meaning linked to motion in the creation of corporeal and cultural

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maps. Regimes of embodiment teach subjects how to feel difference. They work in tandem with regimes of representation by attempting to fix the meaning of physical touch, such as hugs, and the opposite, the revocation and limitation of touch sensation through deportations, to create powerful and lasting significance beyond language and sight.

Whereas regimes of representation primarily operate at the level of the ocular, regimes of embodiment enact restrictions through kinesthesia—a felt sense of the body in motion. Therefore, the ways in which “illegal” bodies are disallowed to touch each other and to move can reveal deeper structures of domination and control in what sociologist John Torpey (1998) called the nation-states’ monopoly of the legitimated means of movement—whereby it tries to control, and justify, the restriction of its inhabitants’ motion.

*TOUCH* exposes the larger discourses around disallowed physical contact for undocumented migrants and citizens through the regimes of embodiment. Racialized regimes of embodiment are choreographic structures that emerged in the 1980s with the intensification of border security and immigration controls. *TOUCH* makes this regime palpable and in turn reshapes the discussion of deportation to teach audiences how to be mobile subjects, regardless of one’s legal status. This vision and attunement are key in a control society where symbolic, material and embodied border violence are made to appear necessary and natural to keep a country sovereign.

*TOUCH* unfolds in a series of mesmerizing border scenarios treating the topic of family separations. Inside the Z-Space in San Francisco, the performance begins with a brief, contained solo by Brittany Harris Espinoza, with the audience less than four feet from her while she is accompanied by a voice over narrated by poet Meliza Bañales. Withholding any mention of immigration or deportation, Bañales tells a story from the point of view of a child who finds it difficult to tell time and who feels in exile from her mom, being unable to touch her. Harris Espinoza is costumed with a light green *stola*, resembling the goddess Libertas from the Statue of Liberty sans torch and crown. A spatial triptych is established: audience, dancer and a black curtain obstructing the audience’s view into the thrust-free performance venue. After completing a short sequence of timid movement around her body, principally with her arms and her face forlorn and pensive, Harris Espinoza’s gown falls off and she sneaks through a crack in the black curtain wearing a desert orange form-fitting tank-top and athletic leggings. As if walking through a portal into a cavernous world, the audience is ushered through the partition and instructed to take seats in the round on stage at the level as the dancers. Lights fade to black when a loud menacing sound detonates like the reverberation of a closing prison door.

Dancers Lacy Gandenberger, Courtney Armani, Lindsay Marquino, Keon Saghari, Marta Zepeda, Hanna Pierce, Tim Rubel and Tiffany Tonel enter the stage in vibrant costumes reminiscent of the southwestern desert landscape. Exhibiting grand, airy, and flowing movement from ballet and mid-twentieth century modern dance forms, the performance air fills with lively original music composed by Kevin Dusablon and Mike Forst. The atmosphere is joyous and celebratory—enchanted string and wind instruments. Bursts of motion and rapid movement executed by the dancers in the opening sequence transform into despair and anguish. Across the production, audiences watch the leitmotif of dancers desperately reaching for each other with their arms extended after being separated by a semi-transparent black curtain and four mini-replicas of the border fence. Repeated sequences of dancers trying to overcome borders and hug thematically reoccur across *TOUCH* after the inciting incident—the introduction of the curtain-as-border. In the final scenes, dancers succeed in disassembling a second iteration of the border. They execute movements atop one another and stand by the wall, making counterbalancing gestures, finding strength and support in one another’s presence. The *mise-en-scène* resonates with the theme of mutual care in tender physical encounters as when dancers navigate rolling points of contact on each other’s bodies, their collective vision epitomizing embrace, support, and release. Like a living sculpture, their interconnected bodies traverse the floor, lightly grazing the stage with each step. This support is insufficient, however, as the final spotlight focuses on two dancers

facing each other, one abruptly disappearing into the dark, the other left with one arm raised and hand cupped, missing its counterpart.

Through a close reading of *TOUCH* and what it complexifies in our understanding of regimes of embodiment, I extend Karen Vedel's analytic of *migratory choreographies* (2020). She argues that attention to choreography in performances that treat the topic of migration and the directorial use of nonconsensual audience participation offers accounts beyond simplistic migrant tropes. I focus on *TOUCH* in the United States and the lack of undocumented migrants in public performance due to fear of identification—even though their stories are a form of creative ethnography and are part of a process that implicates an audience's nonconsensual arrangement. Thus, choreography in the performance is the consensual marshaling of dancers in the creative development, the nonconsensual orchestration of audiences on a theatrical stage, and in the manner that Cindy García (2008) proposes: physical and social movement shaped and informed by culturally situated corporeal meanings and codes not limited to the dance floor.

My analysis is informed by having watched the 2015 performance in San Francisco several times and from having interviewed David Herrera in 2021. I begin with an elaborated account of *TOUCH* and what motivated it, shedding light on the ethical challenges that emerge in this migratory choreography—exposing artistic challenges arising when dancers are safe from deportation but tell the stories of those who have been, or are, threatened. Next, in the second and third sections, I detail the socio-political context of the *regimes of embodiment* and *ungrievable aliens* that developed from the 1980s–2010s. I show how the border spectacle of the movement of migrants marked as corporeally different is reflected in Herrera's performance and how they shape the ethical contradictions of the production. The final section concerns possible disruptions hurled at regimes of embodiment with increasing border security and immigration enforcement.

*TOUCH* advocates for “illegal” migrants by mobilizing fear and anxiety in the sympathetic viewer. It points us to the alienated dimensions of physical contact and the function of bodily performativity in and through border securitization and immigration enforcement. These observations expose critical sites and forms of resilience for and with ungrievable aliens restricted from direct physical contact within the monopoly of sensation.

## Creating *TOUCH*

David Herrera, a gay Mexican-American choreographer based in San Francisco, drew inspiration from his personal experiences and previous works. His 2009 *Origenes de Vuelo/Origins of Flight* narrated his mother's undocumented journey from Mexico in the 1970s. *TOUCH* was born out of Herrera's own upbringing in Hollywood, with immigrant parents and relatives facing the risk of deportation due to their irregular legal status. The catalyst was Herrera's aunt's removal to Mexico, which forced her to choose between taking her American-citizen children or leave them behind—sacrificing their benefits in the United States or being physically separated from their mother with only limited visits. Herrera's personal connection to this complex situation and its impact on future generations compelled him to create a dance performance exploring the felt consequences of forced family separations, creating a migrant odyssey on stage avowing the lives of deported subjects and their families (Brent 2016).

The two major and longest sections in *TOUCH*, each more than ten minutes, evidence protracted separation. The dancers assisted in generating movement material for the resultant production. The first large group section in the performance amplifies feelings of gaiety. With extended arms and radiant smiles, the dancers embark on a captivating journey. They move fluidly, as if they were a herd of fawns playfully traversing an open field. Their collective movements exude a sense of freedom and exhilaration, blending movement vocabularies from what appear to be artists such as

Hanya Holm and George Balanchine. The stage comes alive with a dynamic and fleeting tension. Through a slow transition of sound and lights (from diffused to intense), the mood shifts as the dancers change offstage into somber black attire and the music takes on a melancholic note, underscored by alarm-like processed sounds. The alarm serves as a sound bridge connecting the subsequent scenes and foreshadowing the discomfort to come.

The second major section intertwines with a return of the recorded story by poet Bañales, recounting the heartbreaking experience of a young girl whose mother was deported two blocks away from their home. The performance transitions slowly again to the dancers' navigating the construction of a sheer curtain, dividing the stage in half and symbolizing separation. Curiosity drives the dancers to approach the wall with the leitmotif of hands and arms reaching out. Their movements are infused with a sense of longing and a desperate desire to overcome the barrier. Despite their efforts, the impassable curtain frustrates their attempts at connection. Two dancers are left exhausted and isolated on opposite sides of the divide. With dimmed lights, their bodies are clumped on the ground—the smoldering remains of an unrequited reunion and a stifled cry for unity. The *mise-en-scène* is dreary. The lighting creates opaque and sharp shadows on the dancers, the audience sitting on the round, and the theater space, highlighting the somber impact of physical separation.

Bañales' recorded story continues, exposing the child's journey three years after her mother's deportation. This time, the poem emphasizes the child's emotional turmoil, capturing her sense of confusion and doubt about her memories of her mother. She grapples with the haunting feeling of misremembering, unsure if she can still vividly recall her mother's presence. The narrative delves into the child's perspective of feeling stranded on an island and perceiving walls that may not exist, trapped in a perpetual state of waiting for her mother's return, while feeling adrift and without a sense of belonging. A spotlight casts down on blond-haired White dancer Lacy Gandenberger, her hair pulled back into bun, as she slowly disrobes to light-skinned form-fitting dance tank-top and shorts—suggesting nudity. Inch by inch she unrolls her pant legs and arm sleeves with discomfort. The audience is compelled to look at her as she's been seemingly reduced to bare life. She stands, facing across the sheer curtain separating her from the rest of dancers coming on stage opposite her. The dancers run complicated, exaggerated floor patterns to reach her but are unable to cross the semitransparent divide—accenting the barrier with their bodies jolting back any time they get close. Sensationalized erratic movement is deployed to convey the meaning of desperation.

When I first saw *TOUCH* I was concerned by the performance's overemphasis on bodily gestures through balletic, modern dance and lyrical choreography that greatly prioritized ease, flow, sharp accents and vertical straight lines in *penchés*, *arabesques*, and *pirouettes* leading quickly to the ground and up again—featuring abled bodies and mostly-thin, muscular dancers. The most concerning scenario was Gandenberger's solo, executed through virtuosic ballet feats next to the child's sorrowful account. The overall performance came across as empathetic, but Gandenberger's solo lacked nuance about discursive and embodied issues. The impact was a sensationalized characterization of pain through virtuosity. Ballet and modern dance aesthetics belied the jarring, discombobulated experience of family members being taken away without notice. The preferred movement quality paralleled a neoliberal ethos of the spectacle of ease and flow—itself a regime of representation equating freedom with fluid motion. And, the performance did not include any of the celebratory, erotic, sexual and raucous movements and sensations that can occur before, in and through deportation. It reinscribed the victim-violator binary that, as I argue in another publication, too often defines migrant discourse and performances (Aldape Muñoz 2020). While well intentioned, the performance at times veered toward *theater of migration* tropes (Cox 2014) and *stranger fetishism* (Ahmed 2000) with ballet-like movement style.

Although many performances treat the topic of undocumented (im)migration, a cluster of which are archived in Gad Guterman's *Performance, Identity, and Immigration Law* (2014), Herrera's explicit and rare exploration of deportation through dance was compelling to me. I returned to

the unsettling feeling that performances and moments such as Gandenberger's solo were disconcerting and asked if dance offers insights on deportation differently from other art forms. *TOUCH* has personal resonance for me as someone formerly undocumented, separated from family forcibly and with relatives in legally precarious situations. Dissonance arose because Herrera and his dancers had used oral histories to establish close ties between his sources and the unnamed persons on stage. He was also inspired by seeing documentation of the 2013 Operation Butterfly event organized by the United We Dream coalition. The event coordinated reunions between family members separated by deportation, allowing people to meet and hug at the U.S.–Mexico border. In a promotional video for *TOUCH*, Herrera says the goal of the performance is to create a story “as real as touch itself” to represent the experience of forced separations. Ann Cooper Albright would have us understand Herrera and his dancers’ response to the deportations as “responsive dancing bodies,” which make dance central to the issues of our time (1997, xiii).

Herrera developed *TOUCH* for nine dancers in collaboration with the Los Angeles-based migrant activism group Improving Dreams, Equity, Access, and Success (I.D.E.A.S. at UCLA), made up of, and led by, undocumented and “DACAmended” students. Undocumented persons can include those who crossed without inspection beyond ports of entry, overstayed their visas or applied for asylum and remained in the country when the petition was denied. DACAmended students are undocumented persons benefitting from a federal executive order offering deportation relief if they meet certain criteria. DACA comes from the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals executive order passed by President Barack Obama providing stay without deportation to more than 800,000 qualifying immigrants—who would have most likely benefitted from the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act should Congress have passed it in 2001. The DREAM Act was a stalled federal bill that would have provided stay from deportation, too, but with a legal pathway towards citizenship for children who had arrived in the United States as minors and graduated from high school. DACA offers temporary protection from deportation but no direct path to citizenship. As of March 2024, DACA remains in effect with over 500,000 beneficiaries from nearly 200 countries, but new applicant petitions cannot be processed (“Key Facts on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)”, n.d.). The youth from I.D.E.A.S. shared their personal experiences of being undocumented and DACAmended with Herrera’s dance company members.

The intriguing aspect of the performance is that no identifiable story (oral or visual) of any of the interviewees exists. Herrera traveled with some, but not all, dancers to Los Angeles because he wanted them to learn these stories firsthand, to feel and live the experience directly. During the development stage, dancers and students from I.D.E.A.S. participated in story circles to express the pain of their legally precarious situation directly. No students took part in a performing role in the final project nor did any of their recorded interviews become voiceovers in the production. Herrera and dancers remained in close contact throughout the production’s development in San Francisco. The direct physical link with I.D.E.A.S. authenticated the performance despite not featuring any of the interviewees or their voices. The artistic process prioritized an embodied “act of transfer” (Taylor 2003) to realize the production. For Herrera, dance performance has the capacity to create and transfer an encounter to the same degree as the stories of touch by migrants. He produced *TOUCH* to give audiences the opportunity to understand through dance the students’ stories and his own family’s kinesthetic history.

Dance Studies scholar Royona Mitra (2021) argues that touch and contact are often conflated. She distinguishes between touch and contact, arguing that touch is a sensation and contact is a relationship that does not necessarily require physical interaction between two people. Touch is a one-way sensation, and contact is a relation-generating act (Mitra 2021, 13). The distinction is critical in identifying resistance and relations where immediate physical touch is disallowed or impossible—such as a caste society. Mitra’s focus is on South Asian dancers in training spaces with and without caste-aware pedagogies, but her study is relevant for the assessment of



choreographies of deportation in the United States, given the focus on asymmetrical physical sensations and separations. Mitra's framework affords an understanding of limitations to the type of sensation representable and transmittable when choreographing deportation on stage—as it carries the legal and material consequence of removal after disclosure. Hence, ethical concerns emerge when artists and dancers create sensationalized migrant melodramas of deportation despite not being victims themselves. In Mitra's assessment, touch (sensation) in Westernized dance is linked with freedom and, as Herrera's performance makes clear, its absence is an encumbrance leading to a loss of identity and misremembering. The only solution is found in reinstating touch as physical sensation.

Looking at Herrera's performance through Mitra's intersectional matrix, I would add legal labels as markers contributing to the making of untouchable interactions and the strata of society. Legal labels shape corporeal meanings and codes. They dictate who can move and to what physical ends, doing cultural and somatic conditioning simultaneously. The impact of legal conditions on somatic and cultural representation can also be traced in dance. Cooper Albright rightly identified dance encounters "help[ing] us trace the complex negotiations between somatic experience and cultural representation" (1997, xiv). Herrera and *TOUCH* dancers valorize physical interaction as sensation disallowed for the students and their families by immigration laws, and it becomes a desired site of empathetic encounter for dancers and the audience at a distance. The reoccurring use of Bañales' story as a voice over layered upon repeated gestures of attempted physical contact, physical defeat and the introduction and reintroduction of different kinds of borders has the effect of rendering the meaning that *TOUCH* is not about one single border or one story. It is also about how "illegal" affects migrants and their families' perceptions of reality.

The movement motif of exaggerated reaching in Herrera's *TOUCH* (with dancers often in lunging positions with arms reaching out in diagonal positions) is mobilized in favor of migrant corporeal advocacy and renders an empathetic gesture, but it produces a contradictory sense of contact. Emerging in Herrera's creative process and the resultant production is a predicament in which the responsive dancing bodies can only be responsive with their training in modern dance in the public court of the theater and not the legal court of immigration adjudication processes. They cannot change the I.D.E.A.S students' legal plight and they run no risk of removal. Dancers executing modern and contemporary dance reproduce regimes of representation, too, where dance forms with long lines and emphasis on distal ends become the preferred aesthetic for expressing the corporeal turmoil in deportation narratives.<sup>1</sup>

These saccharine deployments are less the fault of the choreographer and dancers; and more a consequence of the culture of border securitization and the regimes of embodiment pervasive in the United States. In the next section I address the insidious and increasingly racialized regime of embodiment, with its monopoly of sensation through immigration enforcement and migrant suffering scenarios, beginning in the 1980s. These spectacles teach viewers to see racialized pain and valorize unrestricted physical contact. Westernized dance's deployment of touch-as-liberation and its demand for it in migrant dramas, although it appears prescriptive, is not ontologically determined with a fixed meaning. The context of the United States from the 1980s forward informs an understanding of touch as a practice not simply about physical coercion or liberation. Touch (as physical sensation) has floating meanings and immigration enforcement and border security measures significantly contribute to marking racial difference through physical sensation.

## The Sensations and Politics of Illegal Migrant Movement

Herrera's reoccurring movement motif of touch, leading to the marquee title, is an engagement with the re-arrangement of illicit migrant movement through deportations. Precisely because the performance makes no mention in the sound score and voice over about specific immigration policies that inform the performance and the narrative does not follow individual people, except for

the story of an anonymous young girl whose mother was deported, the takeaway is that a pervasive and internalized feeling of deportability is dispersed in the social sphere. Deportation is an affective and kinetic sensation that cannot be uttered, only sensed. To speak of touch in the performance suggests attunement to migrant embodiment and its link to border security and immigration enforcement.

“Embodiment” possesses different, and at times competing interests, from fields as disparate as philosophy and cognitive science (Warburton 2011). In border studies and immigration, the term carries even more profound indeterminacy; yet its treatment in *TOUCH* suggests a phenomenological concern with racialized regimes of embodiment—the corporeal internalization of immigration enforcement and the normative codes and motions for proper citizenship and how these lead to bodily perceptions of allowed and disallowed movement, by which bodies. Offering a theatricalized version of the off-stage kinesthetic experiences impacting the I.D.E.A.S.’s students and migrants’ bodies is an engagement with the internalization of bordering practices and the creation of audiences to observe these.

Corporeal internalization and kinesthetic awareness of restricted movement (for doer and observer) is the result of the exaggerated production of what Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Terence M. Garret, linking phenomenology to borderlands studies, call the perception of fear and its impact on immigration enforcement and border security policy. They argue, “[F]ear is expropriated as a social construct [...]” (2014, 251) for the public to lose sight of reality and allow for the enactment of security industries and political interests. Despite the loss of reality, the audience watches racialized and criminalized geographies shaped by affective maps (e.g., “the Southern border is full of Brown people and crime is rampant. I should feel afraid”). Expropriation occurs primarily through a rhetoric of fear by politicians and the security industry.

Advancing Correa-Cabrera’s and Garret’s argument further, a regime of embodiment dictates which illegalized bodies are allowed to go where and what they can sense during that movement. Rhetoric contributes to the perception of fear and so does choreographed cueing enacted through the dictation of movement when no words are deployed. Racialized regimes of embodiment are the perception of the preferred motion of bodies hailed as “aliens” and the internalized justification of using any security and enforcement means necessary. Regimes of embodiment are akin to what André Lepecki calls *choreopolicing* (2013), but these movement-oriented industries give rise to motion infrastructures and the individual and collective perception of motion as a binary juridical phenomenon. Meaning that if movement is either legal or illegal, both experiences cannot be inhabited simultaneously. Yet to distinguish one from the other, the expropriation of fear and fetishism must be at play for the distinction to occur.

Beginning in the 1980s, border security and immigration enforcement in the United States intensified. Accelerated and technologized bordering mechanisms and discourse gave rise to a racialized regime of embodiment: controlling how migrants should move, how they should sense their bodies, and how their bodies should be perceived by non-migrants. Immigration policies of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton focused principally on curbing unlawful immigration at the southern U.S. border that originated in Central America, despite the low number of immigrants. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, signed into law by Reagan, was the first major federal illegal immigration policy; it regularized the status of alien migrants who were either residing unlawfully in the country before January 1, 1982, or had been working as seasonal agricultural workers with permits for more than ninety days prior to May 1986. This negatively and unevenly impacted Central American migrants, especially Guatemalans and Salvadorians, who arrived later seeking safe harbor during the refugee crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s (Padilla 2022, 18).

The Immigration Act of 1990 increased the number of visas for family-based reunification and highly skilled workers while also creating the new category of Temporary Protective Status

(TPS)—a short-term legal protection for migrants seeking refuge from natural disasters, protracted unrest or conflict (Hesson 2023). Operation Gatekeeper of 1994 restricted illegal migration from Mexico by increasing the number of border patrol agents, checkpoints away from ports of entry, and walls that pushed migrants eastward from areas such as Imperial Beach, California, into less populated, dangerous desert regions (Davis 2019). The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act spread immigration enforcement to non-border spaces.

In the 2000s deportations increased. The 2001 Aviation and Transportation Security Act, after the Twin Towers attacks, ushered in new surveillance mechanisms and funding. In 2002 Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement became part of Homeland Security. Immigration enforcement became synonymous with counterterrorism. From 2008 to 2016 the Obama administration issued mass deportations (Budiman 2020; Hutchinson 2020; “Table 39. Aliens Removed or Returned: Fiscal Years 1892 to 2019”, n.d.). Border processes webbed into other systems: schools, emergency services, domestic travel and banking. The border, Mary Pat Brady makes clear, became “a process far more than a place” (2014, 37).

The years since 1980 have seen a strong response to “illegal” immigration. Migrant “illegality” became synonymous with criminality (Menjívar 2017). Restrictions coincided with a new surveillance system of fingerprinting illegal migrants. Pushing migrant crossings farther eastward linked with neoliberal corporate efforts to attract a dispensable labor force—and President Reagan’s interventionist efforts in Central America (Padilla 2022). When Donald Trump called “illegal” migrants rapists in his 2015 presidential campaign, he conjured cognitive and corporeal maps, part of the fantasy of completely knowing migrants’ lives, bodies, sensation and movement. Expropriating racialized fear, Trump pathologized and criminalized the sex lives and sex acts of Brown migrants from Latin America, particularly Mexico.

Regimes of embodiment from the 1980s contribute to *border scaffolding* (Peña 2020). Regimes of embodiment make up an unequal kinesthetic nation: a bordering habitus creates migrant suffering to justify its ends. Spectacles of suffering are border scaffoldings that transmit bodily knowledge that sovereignty must be protected precisely to make possible the conditions of livability that the migrant desires. Migrants seek citizenship. An unsullied form of citizenship must exist. Regimes of embodiment struggle for the monopoly of sensations by creating wider physical and material fissures between those who can stay and those who are suspected of being inadmissible and thus deportable. This chasm is perpetuated by illegalization efforts (De Genova 2002) and the idea that non-citizens must suffer.

Visual and linguistic representations of migrant suffering on stage re-inscribe the logics of the expropriation of fear and border scaffolding by regimes of embodiment. *TOUCH*’s repeated and exaggerated motif of dancers reaching for each other after the end of boundless, unrestricted happiness parallels the preferred (negative) meaning of migrants in a perpetual state of needing re-capacitation—primarily by the nation-state authenticating their identity and teaching others to see them perpetually as ‘Others.’ In the performance, dancers re-capacitate “illegal” migrants’ stories in ballet and modern dance vocabularies.

## Ungrievable Aliens

Precisely because of racialized regimes of embodiment, *TOUCH*’s theme of deportations, in contrast to the balletic dance style favored across the performance, sets up the audience for favoring a migrant’s pre-deportation life above succeeding stages of life—establishing a binary between freedom and containment after removal. At first this appears no more than the simple affective mapping of the migrant’s plight at removal. However, *TOUCH* stages the sorrows of separation alongside Bañales’ poem, which returns in the performance: the child’s story is played back during



a mournful duet while the girl expresses her preoccupation with a space alien. This section links to migratory choreographies that demonstrate regimes of representation in tandem with regimes of embodiment to render migrants ungrievable. This assessment has a consequence on our understanding of how unauthorized migrants' Brown and Black (and increasingly Asian) bodies are repeatedly illegalized to be made not only deportable but also ungrievable. The concept of ungrievable aliens refers to deportable migrants being viewed as "illegal" and their suffering, death and physical sensations are actively represented as unworthy. Undeserving of mourning, ungrievable aliens are in a perpetual embodied state of exclusion. Aliens are made ungrievable to be made deportable.

Halfway through the performance, after the music changes to a mournful mood and the dancers remove their colorful garb and switch into black tops and bottoms, more dancers enter wearing black and the section ends with most dancers in black outfits. Literally and metaphorically, deportation removes color from life. Accompanying the decolorization, a heavy weight hovers over their bodies. They are hunched over, heads down. Their postures resemble Alberto Giacometti's lonely bronze sculptures. Bañales' poem is played back in this section. The child recounts the inciting incident leading to her mother's deportation: during a routine traffic stop after church on Sunday a policeman could not find her mom's information in a database.<sup>2</sup> The child connects the painful experience to the 1982 movie *E.T.* Like Elliot, the child character in *E.T.*, she too created a make-shift phone in her aunt's backyard to call her mother. She says she also tried to follow the instructions from the popular 1970s and 1980s AT&T phone commercial that said, "Reach out and touch someone." She tried but failed. The voice over concludes with the line, "Everyone cried for E.T., he was an alien, but nobody cried for my mother, except for my brother and me." Although the poem does not name the federal laws deputizing police to act as immigration enforcement, the effect is the same: the mother is removed, and the child is left gutted by the inability to communicate.

While the recording is played back, six dancers are on stage, four wearing colors and the other two all black. This two-minute section is the only moment in the performance not prioritizing an overtly ballet style. Instead, it emphasizes tactile and gripping gestures of control and monopoly. The dancers in black attire stand close to the other dancers and control their movement—surveilling, making contact, and restricting. When they try to get away, they are pushed to the ground, picked up, carried away off stage. Brute force banishes undocumented bodies, leading to the feeling that illegal aliens should exist beyond the reach of visibility. The poignancy of this section comes not in the representation of individual suffering. The narration is about a child and her mother, but the *mise-en-scène* emphasizes a collective vision: four dancers, not two, fighting the hands representing authority figures. Juxtaposing the disappearing dancers with a narration of *E.T.* the alien creates a tension for the audience to reflect on grief.

According to Judith Butler, writing about grief and state-supported violence during wartime, bodies are perceived as precarious only if they are considered grievable in the public eye when born (2015a, n.p.). Consequently, if people gather and cry for bodies denied grievance in the eyes of the state, then they can feel other emotions, such as outrage, and can be a threat to state power. State power is committed to the management of grief. Whereas Butler's notion of grievability is dependent principally on the state's control of affect when people gather to cry collectively, grievability in Bañales' text and the accompanying duets is mediated through state attempted controls of physical sensation (touch) and relationships (contact), particularly along gender lines, with the act of removal and the threat of it.

Uniting the story and the movement is the notion that, for the girl child, what makes her mom different from *E.T.* is how her body and her contact is perceived by a White family in the movie to be ungrievable while an extra-terrestrial is deserving. Making matters worse, *E.T.* phones home to avoid capture and the AT&T commercials featuring happy White families instructs the child to call and touch someone, but she cannot. Her mom is alienated. She disappears sonically

(not possessing adequate telecommunication technologies), visually (not seeing her), and corporeally (leaving her uncomfortable). The young girl is physically and relationally isolated. Both touch as sensation and contact as relationship, in the Mitra sense, is removed before adulthood. This evacuation is eroded not just in the life of the person impacted by the removal but also in the lives of everyone near that deportation—aware of it or not. The girl is held within a *scale of captivity* (Brady 2022)—a child without childhood—despite living outside the confines of a detention center.

Bañales' reference to E.T. the extra-terrestrial, as dancers in black garb attempt to restrict the movement of dancers in colorful clothes, foregrounds the interconnectedness between alienation, deportation and, more importantly, how fictionalized other-than-human bodies and their touch (sensation) are more precarious than the woman and young girl in the story—and thus grievable. The child's mother was unable to induce tears from witnesses of that pain. Bañales collapses the vertical spatial difference between E.T. the alien and the deported alien mother in the story, but not the corporeal experience. The child in Bañales' recording says people cried for E.T. but not for her mom. She tried calling her mother but failed. Meanwhile, dancers in colors attempt to stay on stage but are forcefully controlled and taken off.

Herrera's incorporation of a science fiction alien character in *TOUCH* via the voice over indexes a dominant hegemonic racist and xenophobic visual economy linked with Latinx migrants. Matthew Goodwin (2021) does not employ Stuart Hall's regimes of representation analysis to develop his assessment, but he expresses an equal concern with how controlling images of Latino's as aliens shape identity and counter narratives to those identities, usually asymmetrically. Space alien is marked on Latinx people and functions to keep them as perpetually Othered in dominant White majority imaginations. Where Goodwin valorizes Latinx artists who reclaim space aliens away from negative visual and linguistic 'Othering,' showing them as enlightened beings and the comical source of horror (2021, 59), Herrera's work demonstrates that the function of the space alien linked with migrants is to induce binary corporeal maps that buttress feelings. Racialized meaning is generated from observable racialized feeling.

*TOUCH* accentuates the solace of deportation. It stresses the more pernicious collective affective condition of deportability, which is different from deportation: the former is a corporeal sense of the "possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state" (De Genova 2002, 439). In Herrera's performance, deportability is attended to in the way two different touches manifest. The more common trope of touch with a minor "t" indexes the ungrievable alien's body as it traverses and meets the regimes of embodiment, eventually made to disappear. Touch spelled with a capital "T" represents the racialized regime of embodiment enforced by the nation-state's spectacle of deportability: searching cars, asking for licenses, looking for visas. This form of touch manifests as violent and harmful in the sense described by Mitra. These spectacles and tactile encounters occur over and through ungrievable aliens' bodies outnumbering authority figures, leaving an authorized mark of legitimated bodily pass—corporeal denial or avowal.

The absence of physical contact among performers except for a two-minute section and the ending, the story of the separation of a child from her mother, and the distancing of audience members all serve to convey the notion that the nation-state actively restricts the circulation of emotional power derived from physical and relational connections, particularly in moments of dissatisfaction and grief. Over the past three decades, the United States has increasingly prioritized deportability, expulsion, securitization and enforcement to limit the movement and touch of individuals considered expendable. These measures are implemented alongside a spectacle at the border and the expropriation of fear, which further deepens the divide between those lacking the right to remain and those privileged to avoid removal.

The problem with increased border security and immigration enforcement is not just the borders as physical sites, but also the racialized regimes of embodiment as scaffolding corporeal sites

supporting them. These institutionalized power structures racialize Brown and Black bodies from outside the United States, determine which bodies are deemed important and which kind of touch sensation is considered grievable. Long lines and scenographic elements at border crossings do create a sense of theatricalized limit (Nield 2006); however, as seen in *TOUCH*, the power structures animating the border spectacles are dependent on unequal physical contact between bodies, which occurs beyond the ports of entry. Bordering infrastructures are recreated any time a migrant is detained and deported at: airports, department of motor vehicles, employment offices and banks. They also form in tear glands when grievance is denied and hegemonically orchestrated. To speak of the material borders needed to uphold citizenship's existence and a nation's sovereignty is to be haunted by the specter of the ungrievable alien—the figure whose touch sensation must be recreated and restricted daily for citizenship to function.

## Alien Contact

The main sections of the performance, when viewed together, represent the typical dramatic arc in the theater of migration: mixed-status migrants start out happy and joyful, they experience forced displacement and become sad, unable to overcome the threat and fact of deportation. What makes *TOUCH* a migratory choreography is its reorganization of the audience in a non-consensual manner between the prelude performance and the start of the main movement section, raising questions about whether the duets at the end represent a reunion/departure between child and mother or the desires of the sympathetic audience. Emphasizing the audience's experience in the prologue and epilogue offers durable insight in how *TOUCH* works through bodily acts of transfer as migrant advocacy attesting to the lives of ungrievable aliens. *TOUCH*'s narrative arc offers no legal resolutions or provides specific testimonies. It is also empty of local calls to action for stopping deportations. The focus is physical sensations extending from the research process to the performance at Z-Space. In a previous publication where I examine dance theater representations of undocumented migration into the United States from Mexico (Aldape Muñoz 2020), I argue that audiences are compelled to relate to migrants who disappeared or died through the material remains left behind. Pushing that argument further, when accounting for unauthorized migrants' lives in the United States, Herrera's emphasis on representing deportation stories void of specific details complicates the role of dance and its emphasis on embodiment for audiences to attest to the experience of forced separations.

Not incorporating specific legal conditions of immigrants' plights, even in pro-immigrant spaces, recreates the conditions through which migrants are perpetually created as abstract figures while absolving the law (De Genova 2002). Worse yet, omissions make it impossible to identify effective resistance strategies. Calling for legal specificity in migrant discussions could be deemed a call for more linguistic performativity. Although not writing on migration specifically, Judith Butler distinguishes between linguistic and bodily performativity, two domains through which the socio-political sphere is contested. Where the former manifests in the way language and laws shape and constitute behavior, the latter emerges where corporeal gestures generate meaning and constitute the world around individual non-oral bodily activity and corporeal assembly. Bodily performativity allows people to assemble, and act together, ethically even when linguistic and geographical affinities appear incongruous (Butler 2015b, 22–23).<sup>3</sup>

In *TOUCH*, corporeal meanings are created for the dancers through the creation process and for audience in the work's presentation. The dancers have the history of traveling to Los Angeles and hearing the students' stories directly. Importantly, they honor the I.D.E.A.S students' wishes to remain anonymous in the final performance. They too enact an "agency of movement" (Moreno 2022) by choosing not to be present linguistically. Undocumented and DACAdmented immigrants are keenly aware of the politics that link disclosure and deportability, and kinesis and control. Choosing to not disclose is the youth's demonstration of knowing when to evade

or engage (Asad 2023) and deploying undocumented migrant spatial expertise (Aldape Muñoz 2015).

*TOUCH*'s honoring students' agency and obstructing the audience's shared physical sensation through non-consensual separation calls into being what is left out of the theatrical space (of who could not make it) rather than what is shared in the moment (a migrant melodrama). Meaning, the audience is invited to account for the stories through the regimes of representation and regimes of embodiment that mark the migrant body ungrievable, of having to remain anonymous, and thus knowable through the nation-state's control of the monopoly of movement.

The initial audience separation is contrasted, and thus emphasized, from a post-performance audience encounter valorizing physical sensation. After *TOUCH* ended each evening, Herrera and his performers invited audience members to walk up to the constructed rusted border with another friend or family member and encouraged them to hug over the fence. The audience, unlike the mom and young girl in the voice over and the students from I.D.E.A.S, began separated and reunited, unencumbered.

Herrera's performance expands the experience and relatability of touch denied grievance to the audience as a powerful mediator of bodily engagement concerning illegalization and deportability. On the one hand, *TOUCH*'s dancers surrogate the migrants whose lives are absent on stage—in the Joseph Roach (1996) sense. The dancers are not the I.D.E.A.S. students whose stories were used to develop the performance, and audiences are asked to suspend disbelief. Touch represented is already removed and different from the original people who experienced it. On the other hand, the performance is presencing the victims of state oppression—as Diana Taylor (2020) has helped us understand about performance's capacity to keep people and their stories alive through images or the performative Spanish phrase “¡Presente!”

The audience's physical experience witnessing grief through a non-consensual choreographic instruction is key to the performance's effectiveness in navigating surrogation and presencing without identification. The audience is ushered into the main hall after being randomly separated. At first, the audience is given tickets but not told they are going to be separated from those with whom they came to the performance. After holding the audience at the door until they are all present, Herrera announces that the attendees are going to be broken into two groups; those with blue tickets and those with red tickets. Audience members begin exchanging tickets with strangers to get a color matching the person with whom they arrived. Herrera directs his dancers to stop this kind of behavior and forces the audience to keep their original tickets. Herrera takes on the practice of—again, what André Lepecki (2013) has identified as—*choreopolicing*. Much like a state agent, Herrera becomes an immigration enforcer, authorizing how and where people move, with the audience conforming to the directions and following orders. After watching Harris Espinoza' solo, each group is brought in separately and seated in different parts of the stage away from the people with whom they walked in to see the performance.

Touch and contact represented and choreographed in these initial moments works through and against the logics of the monopoly of movement and sensation. The piece speaks to the audience about their complicity in allowing the racialized regimes of embodiment to persist. Herrera monopolizes the audience's movement and forces them to sit with the discomfort for an hour.

Magnifying the desperation is the reduced time between sections. The time intervals between movements decreases as the performance progresses. The first two major intervals are twelve and seventeen minutes long. Succeeding sections range from four minutes to one. The resulting affect is the acceleration of precarity (Butler 2015b, 10–13). The simple meaning generated from *TOUCH*'s corporeal motifs is that deportation and family separation causes depression, despair and isolation—pathos—for those affected.

Restricting touch throughout the performance is as much about the representation of the deported migrant woman and the child left behind with her aunt as it is about isolating and making the audience-as-witnesses increasingly un-touchable despite the proximity. The dancers are first isolated from the audience through nonconsensual separation and remain distanced from each other. The physical distancing between the audience and the dancers implicates the audience, which sits by and watches as the acceleration of precarity unfolds.

Extending Mitra's conceptual framework and applying it to the meaning of non-consensual movement in *TOUCH*, deportation is as much about limiting the physical sensation (touch) of migrant bodies as it is about rendering the audience as citizen, in the privileged position of staying, protected from contact (relationships) with the migrant body. Physical sensation and relational contact in this performance is not located in one specific story. The performance is equally about nine dancers being surrogates for a painful life they have not endured.

The audience connects to the stories about forced separations by putting themselves in a distanced situation from the migrant woman and close to the legitimated means of control that creates the distance. This distancing, however temporary and without actual, long-term legal consequences, renders the performance an alien encounter. Without having to say the name of the migrants, or their children, and conjuring them with the phrase “¡Presente!”, dancers and audiences make those persons present in the studio, performance spaces, and legal spaces by touching others and bringing corporeal traces of the un-grievable aliens and their decisions into the theater. It is to avow aliens, their feelings and their decision to remain linguistically, but not necessarily bodily, unknown.

What the encounter of non-consensual arrangement exposes is the regime of embodiment that shapes how all parties involved feel and inhabit space—regardless of status—but those in the position of looking at the spectacle of border violence can resist these actions. Thus, the capitalized titular word, “TOUCH,” does not refer to its noun form meaning a denied migrant physical sensation. It signals and screams the active verb form for the immobilized audience to make physical contact with those who have been removed—to reach out and touch them. Even in the safe confines of the dance floor, where we can rehearse choreographies of resistance (Rivera-Servera 2004), the audience allows the agonizing stories to unfold, doing nothing to stop the narrative. Instead, they sit engrossed conforming to the border spectacle of the un-grievable alien.

Rather than reading the performance as empathy producing, the performance challenges the audience to witness the regimes of embodiment and the expropriation of migrant pain to become implicated in the experience by rearranging them to focus on the physical location of contact—even when things appear to be back to normal. The story is not resolved, and the performance becomes about the resilience and creativity of migrants, dancers and audiences finding new ways to establish relationships in the face of increasing regimes of embodiment and the acceleration of precarity. Herrera's invitation to hug in the epilogue is an instructional practice for the audience to resist physically even when words cannot be exchanged under the threat of removal. The intellectual and choreographic political act becomes to repeatedly decode the racialization of movement and the denial of grievance through the stain of legal difference.

## Conclusion

The physical experience of touch and the absence of it has been at the center of (im)migration discourse for the past three decades. Counterstrategy efforts are made on a yearly basis by Hugs Not Walls for people to reunite who have not seen each other for years after decades-long separations. The hug, however tight and close, cannot withstand the legal pressure for people to unlock and return to their respective homes away from each other.



Dance has become a critical counterstrategy. It circumvents regimes of embodiment and sheds light on painful corporeal denials. What is valued in dance is not solely the migrant's physical sensation. The emotional and psychological toll of family separation and deportation addressed in dance performances is about the featured stories, as well as the accelerating disrupted physical experiences and relationships for aliens and citizens in a kinesthetic nation increasingly full of more (deportable) immigrants.

In this article I examined the choreographic work of David Herrera, who uses his dance performances in the face of intensified forced family separations—his families' and others. I highlighted the dance's emphasis on bodily performativity to overcome the devastating impact of separations and the dangers of naming persons who are in legally precarious situations. And I identified two meanings for choreographies of deportation: one refers to the orchestrated way border security and immigration enforcement dictate where and how racialized Brown and Black bodies can move and sense; the other meaning is the aesthetic treatment of immigration enforcement and border security on the performance stage. *TOUCH* valorizes the creative resilience in imagining touch and contact assembled differently by working through the logics of the nation-state's monopoly of movement and contact in its creation of ungrivable aliens beginning in the 1980s.

Choreographies of deportation on stage run the danger of usurping migrants' lives. The physical touch and intimacy prohibited by immigration authorities between family members who have been separated due to deportation carry a weight and significance that cannot be replicated on stage simply through modern and ballet dance styles that prioritize ease and flow. This note is important to foreground as an increasing number of dance performances treat the topic of deportation. For example, Los Angeles-based Primera Generación Dance Collective's *intensity* (2018) and Seónagh Kummer's *La Hielera* (2020) scrutinize the border enforcement practice of separating parents from children in seeking asylum. San Francisco-based choreographer Lenora Lee approached the topic of immigrant detentions and forced removals in *In the Movement* (2022), depicting oral stories featuring the lives and experiences of detained persons and incorporating them as a voice over. Dance *quinceañera* celebrations by young girls in front of detention centers enacted by children of detained immigrant parents with deportation orders critique confinement, too.<sup>4</sup> Young undocumented dancers are also dancing these experiences. In the summer of 2022, I received an email with an attached dance video from a student who was not matriculated at my institution but had reached out after I had given a talk at a summer workshop for aspiring undergrads from across the country who expressed interest in migration studies. In our brief communication the student revealed the gut-wrenching news of their father's deportation and their inability to see them because they, too, were undocumented. The student created the short dance to process the pain of his father's forced departure.

Choreographies of removal across various stages stand to increase should former President Donald Trump win his 2024 reelection and succeed in his promise to launch the largest deportation in American history. Hyperbole or not, the president in office from 2024 to 2028 will have available increasing popular opinion (regardless of political party affiliation) that millions of unauthorized migrants warrant denied grievance—and an arsenal of mechanisms to control motion.

## Notes

1. Like Herrera, Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite addresses migrant plight through ballet aesthetics in *Flight Pattern* (2017). Winner of the 2018 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Dance Production, *Flight Pattern* grapples with the then-surge of refugee migration into Europe and emphasizes displacement.

2. See Rodríguez Vega (2023) for a compelling study on immigrant children's use of art to process deportations.

3. Butler is not saying that by valorizing the gathering of bodies in space that it means an indiscriminate assembly of any bodies is a good thing—White supremacists have the ability to gather, and their bodily gathering does not have the same intent.

4. Thank you to dance studies scholar Tria Blu Wakpa for pointing me in the direction of this event that occurred in Richmond, California, featured in the short documentary film *This Young Girl Used Her Quinceañera to Protest the Separation of Families*.

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