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Choreographies of Immobility: Life Stories and Labour Migration in a Neoliberal Performing Arts Market

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Abstract

This contribution engages with perspectives, concerns and experiences of artists who staged either their own life stories or the life stories of others. At its core, it challenges the idea that staging a life story is solely an empowering, self-enabling and emancipatory aesthetic practice. By analysing two choreographies and their respective working conditions, as well as an interview with one of the choreographers, this article reflects on the commercialisation and neoliberal extraction of personal life stories. Further, this contribution revisits the concept of 'cultural mobility' with two case studies. The first one, *mi vida en tránsito* (2022), draws on the precariousness and vulnerability experienced in times of professional mobility in the Central European dance scene. *Overseas* (2022), the second case study, criticises the Eurocentric assumption that mobility is equally distributed across the globe. To analyse both case studies, this article establishes 'cultural immobility' as a scholarly perspective on how immobility relates to the production, performance, practice and circulation of cultural artefacts and artistic works.

Keywords: cultural (im-)mobility; biographic extractivism; precariousness; artistic labour; neoliberalism; forced migration; contemporary dance

1. Introduction

The performing arts in Central Europe are embedded within neoliberal economies. As a result, artists and their work are deeply intertwined with market logics and economic interests, which in turn are part of a complex matrix that privileges certain aesthetics over others. In recent years, staging a life story has become one of those privileged aesthetics. As dance scholar Christina Thurner observes, life stories are being fostered and perpetuated by funding institutions, artistic venues, and artists themselves (Thurner 2024, p. 20). While academia has widely discussed how staging a life story unfolds as an empowering practice, a critical engagement with its voyeuristic and exploiting dimensions still seeks to be established. Against this backdrop, our contribution to this volume sheds light on the neoliberal and extractive logics behind staged life stories, providing a nuanced perspective that serves as point of venture for future discussions in the field of dance studies.

With this in mind, our article engages with perspectives, concerns and experiences of artists who staged either their own life stories or the life stories of others. By analysing two choreographies and their respective working conditions, we reflect on the precariousness and vulnerability experienced in times of professional migration. While *mi vida en tránsito* (2022) focuses on the transnational career path of the Argentinian artist Elvio Ávila, *Overseas*

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(2022) by the German-Italian duo Tò Su centres on the experience of forced immobility that I-Kiribati fishermen underwent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite negotiating different life stories and different moments of labour migration, both choreographies stage (and to some degree commercialise) the experience of forced (im-)mobility within neoliberal market logics.

The article starts by outlining the ways in which neoliberal economies shape the performing arts in Central Europe, focusing on the economic exploitation of personal life stories. In our first case study, we retrace *mi vida en tránsito* and its working conditions. Complementing our observations with an interview we conducted with Elvio Ávila in July 2025. We challenge the idea that staging precariousness and vulnerability is solely an empowering, self-enabling and emancipatory aesthetic practice. During and after the pandemic, the performance circulated extensively through artistic discourse, mediated encounters, and professional networks, making questions of access, circulation, and reception particularly relevant to this study. As such, the process and conditions in which *mi vida en tránsito* was created and disseminated were heavily discussed concurrently to Elvio Ávila's development and staging of the performance. To complement those impressions and preliminary considerations, we decided to conduct an interview with the Argentinian artist himself in order to gain an inside perspective to the production dynamics of *mi vida en tránsito*. Our second case study *Overseas* was attended live in October 2022 at Kampnagel in Hamburg. It reflects the authors' direct engagement with the embodied and aesthetic dimensions of the work. With *Overseas*, we revisit the concept of 'cultural mobility', criticising its Eurocentric assumption that mobility is equally distributed all across the globe.

The study intentionally combines different methodological approaches in order to address the article's central concern from multiple perspectives. The two case studies were selected not to provide a symmetrical comparison but to offer complementary methodological and analytical viewpoints on the question of cultural (im-)mobility. The selection of the case studies is justified by their strong relevance to the article's conceptual intervention. Both works critically engage with mobility regimes, albeit from different geopolitical and aesthetic positions. Together, the case studies allow us to develop the concept of 'cultural immobility' from both a production-aesthetic and a reception-oriented perspective.

While existing research on cultural mobility has predominantly focused on movement, transnational circulation, and exchange, comparatively little attention has been paid to immobility as a constitutive condition of artistic production, circulation, and reception. To address this conceptual deficiency, we develop 'cultural immobility' as an analytical perspective to understand how immobility relates to the production, performance, practice, and circulation of cultural artefacts and artistic works. By proposing cultural immobility as an analytical lens, this study contributes a timely perspective to contemporary debates in dance and performance studies, particularly in light of post-pandemic transformations, increasing precariousness in artistic labour, and ongoing global inequalities in mobility access.

2. Neoliberal Economies and Personal Life Stories

The entanglement of the performing arts with neoliberal market logics has been explained at the beginning of the 21st century by Jo Caust. As she argues, a pivotal aspect for such a development lies in the systematic restructuring of governmental funding agencies and art policies (Caust 2003, p. 56). Caust argues that funding systems are gravitating toward economic rationalities, especially through the use of market language and measurable social impact (Caust 2003, p. 56). With that, art funding becomes 'justifiable', forcing artists to prove that they are—as individuals with distinct biographies—eligible to funding calls and indeed contribute to the growth of the cultural sector (Caust 2003, p. 53).

A decade later, Jen Harvie retraces Caust's observations and juxtaposes them to newer tendencies in the performing arts. While Caust found that artists were increasingly required to justify their artistic practice in economic terms (Caust 2003, p. 53), Harvie now identifies that artists are pushed by art policies and funding agencies into entrepreneurial modes of self-management (Harvie 2013, p. 62). Mark Banks adds to this finding by introducing the idea that artists are required to create biographies of commercial and professional success to become eligible for funding calls (Banks 2019, p. 552). However, this narration of a linear and coherent professional career contradicts the event-based nature of the performing arts and cultural work in general. Banks (2019, p. 544) draws attention to this ambiguity: "Cultural work has become regarded less as a stable continuity and much more a series of discontinuous *events*; a job-to-job or freelance existence marked by discontinuity [. . .] and enforced mobility" [italics in original].

As Banks argues, the entanglement of governmental funding systems and neoliberal market logics gradually pave the way for artistic biographies to become a key asset in successful funding acquisition (Banks 2019, p. 553). Emanuela Naclerio elaborates this thought by demonstrating how artistic biographies become not only an economic but also an aesthetic resource in the process of project funding and application writing (Naclerio 2023, p. 144). Naclerio underscores that artistic careers are progressively framed as personal projects rather than structurally conditioned experiences (Naclerio 2023, p. 142). It is this very mechanism that reinforces professional life stories (of success or failure) to be valued and staged as an aesthetic resource in the performing arts.

Within neoliberal economies, the subject is no longer regarded solely as a producer of labour, but as a permanently exploitable source of experiences, emotions, and identity markers as the scholar for performance studies André Lepecki points out (Lepecki 2015). Not only scholars but also artists observe these tendencies and articulate them either in accompanying materials such as interviews (Darabi 2021) or directly within the performance itself as for example in the documentary theater *mi madre y el dinero* where the performer says that festivals in the First World are hungry for poor Third World pieces (Anacarsis Ramos/Pornotráfico 2026).

In recent years, a profound shift has taken place in the global art world, economically dominated by Central European institutions. Personal life stories, biographical breaks, and individual narratives of origin have increasingly become economic resources—in particular if they entail the notion of precariousness and vulnerability. Artistic biographies are becoming a kind of immaterial capital that circulates in applications, project descriptions, and funding logics. The supposed authenticity promised by biographical narratives functions as a cultural currency that institutions manage, select, use strategically, and reduce artists to (Cools 2015; Smith 2011).

Neoliberal art economies are based on the idea of a stable subject who is expected to make not only their artistic work productive, but also their origins, migration experiences, and social environments (Banks 2019, p. 552). In this system, as Laurajane Smith point out, identity becomes something that is managed, performed, and made marketable (Smith 2011, p. 69). This dynamic, as Jen Harvie explains in the book *Fair Play* (Harvie 2013), is particularly evident in the Central European dance scene: funding institutions increasingly demand context-sensitive and biography-related works that address and highlight cultural backgrounds. A clear example of this tendency can be observed in the projects supported by Pro Helvetia, where many funded works foreground biographical narratives and culturally situated artistic perspectives (Pro Helvetia 2025).

Institutions, however, often pay less attention to reflect or transform the power structures embedded in the system, which frequently perpetuate dominant ideologies and hierarchies as Sara Ahmed sums up in *Complaint!* (Ahmed 2021). The theatre scholars

Ekatarina Trachsel and Philipp Schulte similarly address this tendency in their article about institutional critique and institutional transformation (Trachsel and Schulte 2023). Instead, they programme so-called 'diverse art' in order to present and promote themselves as fair art institutions. This overshadows and obscures the neoliberal structures of the system. As the ongoing situation proves, the performing arts system is mainly interested in the exploitability of difference rather than in institutional changes (Harvie 2013, pp. 76–81).

This form of biographical extractivism particularly affects artists from the Majority World. While Western artists continue to be read as universal or conceptual, people from marginalised communities are pressured to present their cultural identity as their artistic signature. The narrative of one's own migration history or experience of racism thus becomes a kind of ticket to the European art system—a ticket that is only valid, however, as long as these stories correspond to curatorial expectations. Difference is understood not as a political space of experience, but as a curatorially manageable resource (Greenblatt 2012, p. 7). Difference thus becomes a resource that can be curated and marketed in the field of dance, thereby being essentialised (Alivizatou 2011, p. 92).

The mechanisms are closely linked to the logics of neoliberal markets, which also create a paradoxical situation in the dance scene: artists are supposed to be authentic, but in a way that fits into institutional narratives. Personal life stories are modularised, formatted, and bent to fit, thereby losing their resistant character and being neglected by the system. What is often an expression of injury, exclusion, or structural violence in biographical experience is translated into a productive, communicable, and marketable resource in the neoliberal art world.

Specifically, this creates an imbalance in the artistic labour market: artists who do not want to put their personal stories in the foreground are pushed into the background. At the same time, artists who make their biographies artistically productive are reduced to their role as 'authentic' representatives of the subject matter. The artist is thus not only exploited economically, but also symbolically fixed. The promise of artistic freedom is undermined and replaced by a subtle form of control.

At the same time, structural mobility creates a second level of neoliberal exploitation. Funding structures are often precarious, forcing many dancers and choreographers to work transnationally in order to survive (Greenblatt 2012, pp. 251–52). However, this forced mobility is usually romanticised as an opportunity and a valuable experience (Swiss Dance Days 2026). The pressure to constantly circulate between countries, residencies, and institutional spaces is interpreted as an expression of individual flexibility, although in reality it is an expression of systemic instability. Life stories are not only appropriated aesthetically but are also shaped as social realities—artists become mobile subjects because the structures push them to do so.

Neoliberal economies do not simply reflect personal life stories, but actively produce, shape, and exploit them. The authenticity demanded by institutions is always already curated, in that it makes cultural difference visible without having to take on political responsibility. In this logic, biographical experiences become raw materials to be exploited, while the structural conditions that produce these experiences usually remain invisible.

3. The Fine Line Between Empowerment, Exposure and Endangerment: *Mi Vida en Tránsito* by Elvio Ávila

In the European performing arts scene, there is a dominant narrative in which the staging of an artist's migratory biography represents an act of reappropriation and empowerment. While academia, cultural policy, performance venues and the audience hold to that idea, artists themselves experience this stage practice sometimes differently, especially if they are from the Majority World. Those artists know they have to expose their migratory

biography if they want to enter the European performing arts market. For them, telling their personal life story is not just an aesthetic practice, but a socioeconomic necessity they need to undergo. As the Venezuelan artist Ronald Pizzoferrato told us in a conversation, that is particularly the case at the beginning of their careers: "Lo sabemos todos. Para entrar, tienes que vender tu historia. Luego ya puedes hacer lo que te dé la gana. Pero al principio tienes que contarles lo mal que te fue"[1] (Pizzoferrato 2025). To illustrate how staging a personal life story might not always be an empowering practice, we interviewed the artist Elvio Ávila on his performance *mi vida en tránsito*. In the discussion, Ávila first focused on the exploitation of his migratory biography, before sharing with us his thoughts on exposing his mental health on stage.

Mi vida en tránsito was conceptualised in 2020 by the Argentinian artist Elvio Ávila, who submitted his idea for a performance to *PREMIO—Nachwuchspreis für Darstellende Künste*. This programme awards young artists with subsidised coproductions from major performance venues in Switzerland. As such, *PREMIO* holds a prestigious and unique position within the Swiss performing arts scene, introducing young artists to Switzerland's main performance venues, coproducers, funding institutions and audiences.[2] With the submission of *mi vida en tránsito* in 2020, Ávila tried to gain a foothold in the Swiss performing arts scene. After all, he had studied for the last ten years in Switzerland. However, as soon as he entered the job market, restrictions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemics impeded finding a permanent contract or funding.[3] It is worthwhile mentioning that his residence permit was at stake when he proposed to stage his personal life story. With this in mind, sharing his experience of migration and exposing his mental health issues became more than an aesthetic choice; it was a socioeconomic and geopolitical decision.

Ávila's proposal was successful, the performance got featured in the 2021 edition of *PREMIO*. Nonetheless, that did not prevent him from losing his residence permit. It is important to understand that Switzerland's art funding policies do not interlock with the country's policies on migration. Art funding is managed and organised in Switzerland by the cantons (the member states of the Swiss Confederation), not by the national government itself. As a consequence, there are two different instances contributing to the realisation of an artistic project: (1) the canton provides the funding for an artwork, while (2) the government rules over the artist's residency status.

That being said, most performing artists apply for project fundings that usually last from six to eight weeks. These short-term periods, as explained by Mark Banks, are rooted in a development that the performing arts have witnessed in Europe over the last decades: the work sector has become increasingly event-based with short-term funding (Banks 2019, p. 544). With that, working contracts for artists in Switzerland typically span a few weeks. To be eligible for a yearlong residence permit as a non-European citizen in Switzerland, however, you need a fixed working contract of at least three months.[4] This creates an uncanny and abstruse reality for non-European freelance artists; they struggle to stay in the country that is currently funding them.

So, despite Ávila's successful submission, the Argentinian artist had to leave Switzerland—regardless of the opportunity to develop an evening-length performance with a Swiss venue and Swiss funding. This uncanny and peculiar circumstance led to a collaboration with Savino Caruso, who performed *mi vida en tránsito* on stage and in the copresence of the audience. Ávila, on the other hand, performed online through a Zoom session. Thus, *mi vida en tránsito* shared the experience of forced migration as the performers lived through it. Ávila staged professional immobility simultaneously to witnessing it on his own body.

Ávila and Caruso won *PREMIO's* main subsidy and *mi vida en tránsito* got coproduced by the venue Südpol Luzern. In 2022, the duo premiered with an hour-long performance

that addressed Ávila's depression, suicide attempt and involuntary migration. The piece was a big hit, touring all around Switzerland for three years straight and making it onto the shortlist for the *Schweizer Theatertreffen*, a national performing arts festival. However, despite the performance's persistent success, Ávila never performed *mi vida en tránsito* in front of a live audience, ever. For three years, he performed online from a kitchen table in San Rafael (Argentina): "[E]l teatro se transformó en una imagen con muy pocos pixeles. [. . .] Y cuando cerraba la pantalla, desaparecía el teatro."[5]

To understand the entanglements *mi vida en tránsito* harbours, it was crucial to first retrace the artist's working conditions, so we can now contrast them with the performance's content. The piece moves along Ávila's personal life story, focusing largely on his career path as an artist. The duo shares selected episodes: from growing up in the small town of San Rafael in Argentina, to becoming a tango dancer and later migrating to Switzerland for professional training in physical theatre (Accademia Teatro Dimitri) and acting (Zürcher Hochschule der Künste). Then, Ávila's professional story reaches the present. The performers start to outline how, after ten years of living between Ticino and Zurich, Ávila loses his residence permit. Being forced to leave Switzerland, he moved back to Argentina. Only now, the audience learns that Ávila is performing from his father's home in San Rafael, unable to be on stage physically.

The working conditions in which *mi vida en tránsito* was conceptualised, created and performed are highly precarious.[6] In this context, exposing the experience of forced migration might not be an empowering and self-enabling practice. Official subsidy and broad public interest did not exempt the Argentinian artist from his professional immobility. Considering this, Ávila believes that coproducers, performance venues and audiences had mainly a voyeuristic curiosity about his distress. In fact, as he confessed during our interview, Ávila knew through his professional training in Switzerland about the strong voyeuristic tendencies in Swiss performing arts. As he goes on, he tailored his grant writing and project proposal in order to meet what he believed to be a fundamental expectation of local funders, venues and audiences—the staging of fragile life stories. However, Ávila decided to share his story on stage for a different reason, too. The Argentinian artist wanted to raise awareness and to speak openly about depression in men, since he felt that it is underrepresented on European stages. Being a topic that is barely touched in public discourse, in family meetings, or even among male friend groups, Ávila had the impulse to address it artistically.

As Ávila emphasised right at the beginning of our conversation, the performance left "un tatuaje psicológico" (Ávila 2025, 00:08:25) on him (engl. 'a psychological tattoo'). Staging and exposing his professional immobility marked him: albeit receiving subsidy by Swiss funding institutions, performing in Swiss venues, sharing his story with Swiss audiences, and forming part of the Swiss performing arts scene, Ávila was not permitted residence by Swiss authorities. This unsettling contradiction reflects how personal life stories gain market value within neoliberal economies. Exposing your migratory biography grants you funding, but not a permit. Exploiting your immobility gets you on stage, but not into a country. *mi vida en tránsito* shows that staging professional mobility is one thing—actually enabling it in our society is another. Stories of migratory experiences are highly demanded in the Swiss performing arts scene, as several funding calls on the website artlink.ch showcase (artlink 2026). However, they are asked to stay an aesthetic element and abstract discourse. The longing for migratory life stories ends as soon as they threaten to become social realities. From our point of view and based on Ávila's statements, that has little to do with emancipation, self-enablement or empowerment.

Besides focusing on Ávila's migratory biography, the performance addresses his mental health issues. Still dealing with depression, Ávila told us that he only managed

to perform *mi vida en tránsito* because he had mental health support between shows: "Eso. . . Eso es fuerte. Eso. . . Sí, eso tiene magnitudes que tuve que llevarlas con un team [equipo] que me armé en Argentina, de psiquiatras y psicólogos."[7] The artistic team and the coproducers in Switzerland knew about Ávila's mental health during the showings of *mi vida en tránsito*. And yet, the collective decision was to keep performing for three years. As Ávila reflects, everyone thought they were helping him. Venues and audiences believed, on their part, that exposing his depression was emancipating him. Looking back, the Argentinian artist recognises that he exploited his mental health to a point where he seriously endangered his well-being: "Nunca en mi vida había hecho algo tan arriesgado por el teatro. Y no es el teatro, es la idea romántica del teatro. La idea de que, a partir del sufrimiento, se puede conseguir algo."[8] With this contemplation, Ávila denounces the romanticised idea that the performing arts (intrinsically) empower or self-enable vulnerable and precarious bodies, offering them a space to voice their stories. For Ávila, it had quite the opposite effect. After exposing his personal life story with its episodes of depression, he developed a fear of the performing arts: "Tengo miedo de ir al teatro. Tengo *miedo* de *ir* al teatro. He desarrollado un *puto* miedo de ir al teatro."[9]

As *mi vida en tránsito* demonstrates, staging a life story does not necessarily represent an act of self-enablement or emancipation. Sometimes, the practice of publicly sharing migratory biographies and mental health issues[10] is driven by well-concealed voyeurism. Under the cover of empowerment, such a stage practice unravels its neoliberal and extractive logics quietly. It exploits and endangers artists, exposing their lived precariousness and vulnerabilities. Because those life stories sell, because those life stories appeal. Ávila's experience during the creation and showings of *mi vida en tránsito* is a call for the performing arts scene in Switzerland and elsewhere. It is an invocation for people in decision-making positions to critically reflect on their own funding logics and curatorial practices, an encouragement for venues and audiences to question their own voyeuristic expectations and viewing habits. It is an urgent plea for academia to challenge the idea that life stories are merely constructed on stage—they inherit an intrinsic market value, as Smith argues (Smith 2011, p. 69), especially if they entail any form of precariousness and vulnerability.

4. Cultural Immobility

Our analysis of *mi vida en tránsito* draws attention to how life stories are commercialised and (sometimes) exploited within the neoliberal funding logics that the performing arts in Switzerland thrive on. Ávila's performance is situated within a specific national arts market, still the commercialisation and exploitation of migratory biographies can be observed throughout Central Europe.[11]

Apart from that, the performance displays a second entanglement between contemporaneous choreographies and neoliberal economies: *mi vida en tránsito* unveils a specific relation between global (im-)mobility and funding institutions. Notably, the precarious and vulnerable working conditions experienced throughout the creation, the rehearsal and the staging of the performance call for a critical revision of the concept 'cultural mobility' and its role within the performing arts.

Having touched briefly on it earlier, professional mobility is romanticised in the European dance scene as an opportunity and a valuable experience for artists. The constant circulation between countries, residencies, and institutional spaces is interpreted as an expression of individual flexibility and cultural enrichment. Such a doctrine nourishes and upholds the idea that professional mobility enhances an artist's aesthetic profile. Whether professional mobility inevitably has a positive impact for artists is up to debate. In this article, however, we want to elaborate an analytic vocabulary that is not only able to express global mobility, but also the state of immobility experienced in *mi vida en tránsito*. To do so,

we will propose the term 'cultural immobility' by deriving it from the related concept of 'cultural mobility'.

Cultural mobility, and this is very important to establish, is a specific academic perspective on culture. In itself, it is nothing else than a framework, theorised by scholars like Stephen Greenblatt[12] in the early 2010s to comprehend the production and circulation of "culture in an age of global mobility" (Greenblatt 2012, p. 1). As such, cultural mobility helps to grasp transregional and transtemporal ways in which culture is performed and practiced (on stage as well as within everyday life).

When the framework was first introduced, it tried to counter the dominant narratives of global and transregional studies at that time, which—as Greenblatt sums up—took "for granted the stability of cultures [. . .] before they [get] disrupted or contaminated" (Greenblatt 2012, p. 3). Within this new conception of cultural mobility, culture was no longer produced, performed, practiced or circulated merely as a result of mobility—culture *is* mobility. Such a perspective allowed academia to conceive culture not as the consequence of migratory movements between geographic areas, but as movement itself.

Following Greenblatt, in the emerging field of mobility studies, researchers are interested in "microhistories of 'displaced' things and persons" (Greenblatt 2012, p. 17). Greenblatt argues that by tracing (human and non-human) bodies, "their places and their out-of-placeness", scholars put "the management of movement (its restriction, its amplification and, above all, its diffusion) at the center" (Greenblatt 2012, p. 19). In other words, mobility studies are intrigued by movement, asking how movement relates to culture.

Throughout the last decade, Greenblatt's concept of cultural mobility has been criticised heavily. Many scholars challenged the framework's core conviction, questioning mobility as the main requirement for the production, performance, practice and circulation of culture. Such an assumption, as O'Brien-Kop, Ren and Rippa argue, is strongly biased by Eurocentric perspectives that dominated the field of mobility studies since its formation (O'Brien-Kop et al. 2024, p. 2). Obviously, global mobility is unequally distributed throughout different geographic areas of the world—a notion 'Western' academia failed to consider until recently. Not every person is able to move across the globe to the same degree. In fact, some people cannot move at all. And still, the restriction or absence of movement likewise relates to the production and circulation of culture. It is this observation that initiated our endeavour to theorise the analytical perspective of 'cultural immobility'.

The sociologist Inka Stock encourages mobility studies to incorporate immobility as a research subject, insisting that "[m]ovement and immobility are two interdependent parts of the same coin" (Stock 2019, p. 9). Elaborating a precise analytical tool, Stock distinguishes three different dimensions of immobility. She understands immobility "as a distinctive phase during a migratory process; as a rightless state of being; and as a condition of life" (Stock 2019, p. 10). Adapting those three dimensions of immobility into our concept of 'cultural immobility', we comprehend cultural immobility as a distinctive phase during an artist's career; a rightless state of being; and as a condition of life.

As a result of our revision of cultural mobility, we propose 'cultural immobility' as a scholarly perspective on culture in an age of global immobility. With that, cultural immobility becomes a framework to understand how immobility relates to the production, performance, practice and circulation of cultural artefacts and artistic works. At its very core, cultural immobility is intrigued by the absence of movement, asking how the absence of movement shapes and brings culture forth (and vice versa).

On a closing note, we are well aware that the concept of 'cultural immobility' is not a new perspective on culture at all. Scholars have developed similar vocabularies and concepts to understand the relationality of (im-)mobilities and culture(s) in the Majority World. Nonetheless, it was only through our case studies that we realised the need for such

a vocabulary, explicitly for the context of Central Europe and the performing arts. In fact, it was not the performances themselves that led to our revision of cultural (im-)mobility, but the working conditions that were shaped by a specific historic context: the COVID-19 pandemic.

While global mobility is unequally distributed throughout different geographic areas of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic levelled to a certain degree the privileges of mobility on a global scale. As Harasym, Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson reflect, it "made waves across the globe, affecting (im)mobility patterns" (Harasym et al. 2022, p. 1). For Harasym, Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson, it goes without saying that the pandemic had different impacts on different groups of people, since "[i]mmobility is influenced by a host of factors such as gender, class, and race" (Harasym et al. 2022, p. 1). However, COVID-19 affected mobility patterns in Europe in an unparalleled way, enabling the experience of systematic and forced immobility in a geopolitical space that is accustomed to a high degree of mobility.

5. Choreographic Negotiations of Cultural Immobility: *Overseas* by Tò Su

While professional mobility in contemporary European dance is often seen as a prerequisite for artistic visibility and professional survival, certain historical and political constellations, in this example during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, reveal the other side of this mobility logic: cultural immobility. The immersive video installation *Overseas* (2022) by the German-Italian duo Tò Su[13] (Martina Mahlknecht and Martin Prinoth) focuses precisely on those moments of enforced immobility brought about by economic, political, and legal power relations. The piece is based on the situation of numerous sailors from the Pacific island nation of Kiribati who were stranded in the port of Hamburg during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kiribati government, fearing the coronavirus, closed its borders and did not allow its citizens back into the country. For I-Kiribati who were abroad by that time, the borders closed, making it impossible for them to return to their families until further notice. In addition, the I-Kiribati sailors in Hamburg were not allowed to leave the boat and enter Germany due to a lack of visas. For many of them, this meant being away from home for two years and not being able to attend important (family) events. Amongst other things, those sailors missed the birth or the first years of their children's lives.

In a flooded stage space, the audience is immersed in the sailors' stories of longing, separation, money, recognition, pride, community, and environmental risks (Tò Su 2026b). Using documentary performance techniques, the artists provided insights into global goods traffic and its vulnerability, making it visible, tangible, and accessible. Before entering the flooded stage area, audience members were equipped with rubber boots and iPads. The audience moved freely around the stage space, a floor filled with water, scanned the QR codes floating in the water, and watched the sailors' videos via an individual parcours. *Overseas* was created during the pandemic, in a context in which public discourse romanticises professional mobility as a liberal exchange process, making it a particularly vivid example of the aesthetic/choreographic negotiation of cultural immobility.

The piece deconstructs the sailors' narratives thematically and reveals how mobility is unevenly distributed and how non-European bodies marked as 'foreign' are subject to fundamentally different conditions in transnational economies of movement. *Overseas* works with repetition, spatial limitation, and cyclical movement sequences in the thematically structured videos: the sailors sit on chairs in their work clothes and in each film clip the camera pans from one to the next. All the sailors answer the same question without the audience knowing what the question was. At the beginning of the video, only the theme of the clip is mentioned, but it is still possible to guess what the question might be.

Due to the flooding of the stage area and the movement of the audience through the water, there is a constant sound of wading bodies. In addition, ventilation systems are installed on the walls of the room, so that when entering the room, a background noise is created that resembles the noise on the ship of the I-Kiribati workers. The stage space brings the sailors' experiences closer to the audience without depicting the space naturalistically. Through the attendance in person, the author experienced this immersive setting firsthand, moving through the flooded stage space alongside the sailors' narratives and digital testimonies. This reflects the direct engagement with the embodied and aesthetic dimensions of the work in situ. The performers move between confinement and exhaustion, between mechanical processes and abrupt delays. These dynamics refer to central parameters of cultural immobility: spatial restriction, lack of movement, economic dependence, and structural control/power. *Overseas* shows how loss of mobility not only affects the physical dimension, but is also inscribed in the posture, breathing, and energy of the body, as the scenes show particularly clearly when the sailors talk about the pregnancy of their wives and missed birth of their children (Mahlknecht and Prinoth 2022, from 00:29:33). The performers' bodies become a projection surface for a structural experience that accompanies global labour migration and, in a broader sense, aesthetic mobility; the body circulates as a labour force, but the person remains bound to it, as we illustrate in the first example *mi vida en tránsito*.

Nevertheless, the artist duo Tò Su refuses to present an illustrative, documentary representation of historical events. Instead, they create a performative field of tension in which viewers can comprehend and experience the sensations of confinement, monotony, and waiting in their own bodies. This aesthetic strategy can be understood as a response to the extractive logic described at the beginning of this article. The expectation that artists from the Majority World should make their biographical migration aesthetically accessible is not completely fulfilled in *Overseas*. The installation—in contrast to *mi vida en tránsito*—does not tell a pure identity story and does not present the sailors as authentic figures. Rather, the piece draws attention to the structural conditions of global inequality that fundamentally challenge the Eurocentric discourse on professional mobility.

By using cultural immobility as a productive, albeit painful, aesthetic resource, *Overseas* criticises the neoliberal mobility dispositives that prevail in the European dance scene. Artists are expected to be flexible, to move between countries, residencies, and funding programmes, while at the same time performatively producing their supposedly stable cultural identity. However, the video installation shows that (im-)mobility is not a neutral act but is embedded in global power relations that determine who is allowed to move, who must move, and who is prevented from doing so. From this perspective, *Overseas* becomes not only a political performance/choreography about maritime working conditions, lack of support structures, and precarious living realities that drive people into forced mobility, but also a statement about the dance scene itself. In addition, the video installation illustrates how neoliberal exploitation works by showing a European artist duo using the stories, biographies, and realities of life of seafarers from Kiribati, employing these people 'just' as collaborators or experts in their own artistic research (Schwazer 2022, p. 20; Weissenegger 2022).

The video installation also uses sound and rhythm to further explore the relationship between movement and stillness. The installation works with repetitive industrial noises that evoke cyclical work processes, reinforcing the feeling that the stage space becomes a place of permanent but undirected activity. The performers are in motion, but these movements lead nowhere, in no particular direction—a choreographic expression of what immobility can mean in a neoliberal context. Mobility becomes an illusion when structural conditions prevent movement from generating agency.

Another parameter of cultural immobility that *Overseas* makes visible is the invisibility of those subjects affected by mobility inequality (Greenblatt 2012, pp. 250–51). The sailors on whose story the video installation is based are largely unknown to the public consciousness, even though their predicament takes place in the midst of an important European trading city. Tò Su does not attempt to correct this invisibility by portraying or individualising the stories—instead, Mahlknecht and Prinoth reveal the mechanisms that create invisibility in the first place: administrative practices, spatial segregation, and economic assessments that mark certain lives as replaceable or unimportant. These strategies of invisibility have parallels in the European dance scene, where migrant artists often only become visible when they position themselves along institutionally desired narratives, which in a way is also what happens in the video installation.

Finally, *Overseas* also refers to the affective dimensions of cultural immobility. The video installation works with moments of standstill, exhaustion, and emptiness, which are experienced not as dramaturgically staged pauses, but as existential states (Mahlknecht and Prinoth 2022). This contains a clear criticism of the idea of professional mobility as a creative or inspiring experience. The mobility of sailors is an economic necessity that turned into immobility when working conditions and the circumstances of the pandemic fixed them in Hamburg. Through this affective perspective, the project connects themes of cultural immobility with the emotional stresses of migration, precariousness, and compulsory labour—aspects that are often neglected in the glorified narratives of transnational art projects.

Overseas thus provides a counterpoint to the normative discourse on mobility in the European dance scene. It insists on the question of under what conditions movements (can) take place, which bodies benefit from them, and which bodies pay for them. The piece makes it clear that mobility must be understood not only as an opportunity, but also as a mechanism of exclusion.

6. Conclusions

In recent years, personal life stories have increasingly become economic resources in the performing arts scene in Central Europe. With this article, we retrace the entanglements between neoliberal funding logics and the exploitation of migratory biographies. By analysing Elvio Ávila's *mi vida en tránsito*, we draw attention to how neoliberal economies not only stage personal life stories, but actively produce, shape, commercialise and exploit them. Those observations are contrasted with Ávila's experiences during the performance's creation and showing. Our findings challenge a widely accepted assumption in academia and the performance arts, wherein staging a migratory biography solely represents an act of empowerment, self-enablement and emancipation. In the case of *mi vida en tránsito*, this stage practice unravelled its neoliberal and extractive ambiguity quietly, endangering the artist by exposing his lived precariousness and vulnerability.

Further, this article engages in the critical revision of cultural mobility. Over the last decades, cultural mobility has become a key concept for dancers and choreographers to present and disseminate their work on a global level. However, our second case study *Overseas* by Tò Su underlines that mobility is a privilege unequally distributed throughout the globe. For this reason, we propose 'cultural immobility' as a scholarly perspective on culture in an age of global immobility (like the COVID-19 pandemic). We conceive cultural immobility as a framework to understand how immobility relates to the production, performance, practice and circulation of cultural artefacts and artistic works. As our analysis of *Overseas* highlights, the loss of cultural and transnational mobility is not only a structural experience that accompanies global labour migration, but a physical and aesthetic experience that inscribes itself onto the body. We argue that *Overseas* is a choreographic

expression of immobility, explicitly criticising neoliberal mobility discourses that prevail in the European dance scene.

In its core, this article showed different ways in which the concept 'cultural immobility' enables new perspectives on the neoliberal arts market. On a closing note, we encourage scholars in dance and performance studies to engage with 'cultural immobility' since this framework acknowledges the geopolitical realities of artists from the Majority World in relation to professional mobility more widely. As a counterproposal to the assumption of unlimited global mobility in neoliberal economies, 'cultural immobility' includes and critically rethinks experiences of mobility restriction in the production and dissemination of (performing) art. For future research, it would be useful to supplement the analysis with more interviews with artists or collaborators in order to systematically incorporate their perspectives on how the art market operates.

Due to the concept's emphasis on movement (and the absence of movement), we specifically invite dance and performance scholars to explore 'cultural immobility' in their research. As scholars trained in observing, contextualising, analysing and interpreting movement, we can provide valuable insights to the growing field of (im-)mobility studies.

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Notes

1 "We all know it. To get in, you have to sell your story. Afterwards, you can do whatever you want. But in the beginning, you have to tell them how badly things went for you." Transl. by the authors of this article.

2 Originally, *PREMIO* awarded only one company per year with a major funding and an official coproduction. The national competition for young talents changed its way of promoting early career professionals in 2023, newly granting all eight finalists fundings and coproductions.

3 The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the performing arts and its funding logics on a global level. *mi vida en tránsito*, however, showcases how the precariousness and vulnerability experienced by migrated artists without citizenship were amplified during that time. For a more in-depth discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and the performing arts, consult the next section of this article.

4 To receive a residence permit in Switzerland as a non-European citizen, applicants have to be in possession of an employment contract. Non-European citizen can apply for a 5-year permit if their contract runs at least for 12 months, or for a 1-year permit if the contract ends after at least 3 months. Either way, applicants are only eligible in case of a fixed working contract of at

least 3 months, which for most freelance companies in the performing arts is hardly achievable due to the market's modes of production. The usual employment period for dancers and performers oscillates around 6 to 8 weeks.

5 Ávila (2025), 00:09:00–00:09:15. "Theatre became an image with very few pixels. [...] And when I closed the screen, theatre disappeared." Transl. by the authors of this article.

6 Depending on your point of view, you can argue that Elvio Ávila's working conditions were not as precarious as he recalls. After all, Elvio Ávila was able to uphold a regular income at a time of mass unemployment for artists worldwide (the COVID-19 pandemic). Additionally, he was paid by Swiss standards and earned considerably more than his Argentine colleagues.

7 Ávila (2025), 00:13:33–00:13:50. "That... That's heavy. That... Yes, that has dimensions that I had to address with a team of psychiatrists and psychologists that I put together in Argentina." Transl. by the authors of this article.

8 Ávila (2025), 00:34:18–00:34:34. "Never in my life had I done something this risky for the performing arts. And it's not the performing arts, but the romanticised idea of the performing arts. The idea that, parting from suffering, one can achieve something." Transl. by the authors of this article.

9 Ávila (2025), 00:58:44–00:58:52 (emphasis in original). "I'm afraid of going to the theatre. I'm *afraid* of *going* to the theatre. I've developed a *fucking* fear of going to the theatre." Transl. by the authors of this article.

10 In *mi vida en tránsito*, the experience of forced migration is tightly connected to mental health issues. However, not every staged migratory biography necessarily entails the deterioration of an artist's mental health.

11 We will illustrate the neoliberal commercialisation and exploitation of migratory biographies in other national funding systems later on. By discussing the performance *Overseas* in the next section of this article, we will focus on the German performance arts market and its neoliberal logics.

12 We are aware that Stephen Greenblatt is a heavily cited voice in (im-)mobility studies, and that he theorised 'cultural mobility' a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic altered global mobility patterns. That being said, we still conceptualise 'cultural immobility' following his description of 'cultural mobility'. For one, Stephen Greenblatt was among the first to outline how mobility influences culture and vice versa. Despite not mentioning it himself, his proposal is likewise immanently productive for the relation of immobility and culture. By using him as a point of venture, our line of thought demonstrates how immobility was from the beginning part of cultural mobility, but only made it into academic discourse a decade later. Also, by venturing from Greenblatt, our discussion shows how quickly the field of (im-)mobility studies developed into an area of critical studies.

13 Tò Su comes from the Romansh language and means to record, document, and include (Tò Su 2026a).

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