

TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO ACTIVISM ACROSS TEXTS AND GENRES An Overview

LORENA CARBONARA, MIRKO CASAGRANDA
UNIVERSITÀ DELLA CALABRIA

*[A] woman said to me,
'You have to decide whether you want to be
an artist or an activist'.
I said, 'Why can't I be both?'
That's how I've always felt.
(Madonna "Rolling Stone", 2009).*

With a long-standing tradition in the humanities, activism has constantly informed both cultural production (Serafini 2018; Tilche 2022; Zabala 2017) and scholarly theoretical thinking (Morris, Hjort 2012). Since their foundation, disciplines like critical discourse studies, gender studies, queer studies, and postcolonial studies – to mention but a few – have been striving for social change (Harcourt 2017; Kim 2021; Kirsch 2000; Sethi 2011; Wodak, Meyer 2016; Young 1999). If one considers the plurality of cultures within the English-speaking world, the decolonial turn in postcolonial studies is a good example of such an engagement, with its epistemological shift from a post- to a decolonial perspective often benefitting from scholarly activism (Mignolo, Walsh 2018; Vallorani 2016). Over the last decade, academia itself has started questioning its Eurocentric ontological foundations (Mbembe 2016; Rodríguez 2018), looking for new paradigms to narrate and negotiate the complexity and diversity of the world inside and outside its boundaries.

When it comes to the arts, activism is tightly related to the concept of performativity, i.e. language(s) as social action(s) with the power of affecting reality (Foellmer *et al.* 2017; Hildebrandt *et al.* 2019; Pennycook 2000). Indeed, it is mostly through performance and language that artists carry out protests, oppose resistance, and create new narratives that complicate and contradict hegemonic discourse (Rhoades 2012). Such practices are commonly labelled as *artivism*, a blend of the terms *art* and *activism* used in the late 1990s to describe the work of Chicana/o artists in the United States. The potential of artivism to capitalise on community resources (Rhoades 2012) and bring real change is particularly effective in urban contexts characterised by high levels

of superdiversity (Arnaut *et al.* 2015; Vertovec 2007), i.e. places where linguistic, ethnic, religious, and social variables dynamically intertwine and overlap so as to generate hybridised forms of communication and cultural production that originate outside traditional institutions, such as museums and art academies, and quickly disseminate throughout the Internet and across social networks.

The enriching and stimulating dialogue established between activists and local marginalised communities positively impact society at large as well. In the case of education, for instance, innovation and creation become the new language of social engagement within the classroom walls (Aladro-Vico *et al.* 2018). The organic relationship between art and activism postulated by Sandoval and Latorre (2008, p. 82) is further complemented by the concept of activism as a form of critical and/or political art occupying and contesting urban public spaces:

One of [activism's] main features is that it develops in urban environments and posits the appropriation of public space as a strategy to fight multinationals, consumption and unequal globalization, which is leaving a large number of people worldwide without any rights or material well-being. (Rodal *et al.* 2019, p. 26)

The visibility, proliferation, and popularity of activist projects on social media, in turn, increasingly influences the public debate on pressing contemporary issues such as the consequences of international geopolitics in terms of catastrophic wars and human losses, worldwide migrations, climate change, global pandemics, and transnational civil rights movements, which all are more and more digitally interconnected and (trans)mediated.

Artists creatively represent and question these topics in what can be defined as multifaceted forms of intellectual and activist engagement, from environmental issues (Benedetti 2021; Egya 2020; Ghosh 2016; Streeby 2018) to the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East (Larzillière 2023; Palomo-Dominguez 2022; Zychowicz 2023), from the movement of people across borders (Carbonara, Renna 2023; Cazzato, Silvestri 2020; Pulitano 2022) to the future of the African continent (Dauda, Falola 2021; Oboe 2019), from the discrimination against queer communities (Zebracki 2020; Van Klinken 2020) and Indigenous peoples (Carlson, Berglund 2021) to the violence against women (Hargreaves 2017). In this scenario, activist translation as well plays a fundamental role in connecting and empowering transnational movements, managing conflict, contesting existing forms of discrimination and injustice, and producing social transformation (Baker 2006; Gould, Tahmasebian 2020; Tymoczko 2010; Vallorani 2021).

This special issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi* aims to explore how activism fosters cultural and social change through performance art, literary provocations, music experimentations, and translation in the works of writers,

spoken word poets, intellectuals, publishers, musicians, and performance artists. Relying on hybrid modes of communication and exploiting the technological resources of the new media – especially social networks – to reach a wider audience (Alperstein 2021; Gerbaudo 2012; Treré 2020), they also produce new kinds of textualities and genres that need a transdisciplinary approach to be fully interpreted and appreciated. Not only do the texts and the projects analysed in the following articles question the past and challenge the present, but they also envisage and anticipate a better and more just future by creating a performative counter-discourse in which the combination of verbal, visual, gestural, and musical language is pivotal.

In “Travelling Muses. Women, Ancient Grammars and Contemporary ARTivism in Refugees’ Tales”, Nicoletta Vallorani shows how activism finds a productive ground in the commonalities of stories. She explores the representation of contemporary migrants through the alphabet provided by classical Greek literature, investigating the ways in which activists account for the risks, losses, difficulties, and hopes implied in forced migration across the Mediterranean. More specifically, the scholar focuses on two documentary films inspired by Sophocles’s *Antigone* and Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* – Yasmine Fedda’s *Queens of Syria* (2014) and Itab Azzam and Bridgette Auger’s *We Are Not Princesses* (2018) – maintaining that the blueprint offered by the classics may create a common semiotic system connecting ancient Greece, contemporary Middle East, and European audiences. According to Vallorani, as a matter of fact, the cooperative construction of new plays from old ones and the interweaving of oral and written languages, drawings, and collaboratively produced texts generate a notion of language that is mobile, flexible, constantly reshaped, and explicitly ‘accented’.

The migration of musical expressions is analysed in Pierpaolo Martino’s article, “Poetry, Sound, Resistance. Kamau Brathwaite’s Jazz Aesthetics”. The author postulates that African American jazz is a stylistic resource as well as a subversive space in which a plurality of languages voice the modernist sense of alienation, chaos, disillusionment, and hope that characterises not only African American or West Indian literature but every subaltern culture in the world. The essay explores Brathwaite’s jazz aesthetics with a focus on the *Arrivants* trilogy (1973), which includes the collections of poems *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969). Since jazz is a form of art which confers centrality to listening and redefines the self in dialogic terms, Martino argues that the strength of Brathwaite’s art resides in its capacity to activate a committed response on the part of the reader/listener and to convey ideas of possibility and unpredictability through an approach which blurs national borders and invokes a communal cultural, literary, and musical experience of resistance.

In “Sanctuary of Slavery. Relocating Race Through Sound in an Alpine Town”, an ethnographic account of his own experience as a curator, Gianpaolo

Chiriaco focuses on the existence of Black spaces in South Tyrol and the role of music in creating and defining them. In his analysis of *Sanctuary of Slavery*, a performance he organised in 2018 together with Napoleon Maddox in which musicians and artists of African origin as well as asylum seekers and refugees were brought together in the small town of Schlanders/Silandro, he demonstrates how musical sounds and singing voices can relocate the discussion about race and challenge a stereotypical representation of African migrants making music for a white European audience. Giving space to their voices, as a matter of fact, the performance generated a sense of community among asylum seekers, refugees, and locals interested in musical expressions and solidarity. For Chiriaco, the sound and vocal reflections that were built before and during the performance are an activist response to the discrimination and violence against the black body.

In “Storytelling and Artivism in Current Migration Narratives. Reshaping and Expanding the Anglophone Postcolonial Literary Canon”, Maria Festa explores new paradigms that are introduced to narrate and negotiate the complexity of current times. The paper focuses on artivism in Warsan Shire’s poetry – especially the poem “Home” – and in the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group’s digital stories *28 Tales for 28 Days* (2018). Digital activist storytelling, the author argues, is a distinctive example of the way contemporary migration literature blends with artivism and expands the postcolonial literary canon. Indeed, the texts analysed by Festa expose the plight of present-day migrants and display the supplementary feature of social activism by blending forms and modes of expression and production along with cutting-edge technologies, which results in transnational political dialogues that travel across digital space and create new strategies of active participation in the culture industry.

Climate change, one of the most compelling challenges of our present time, is examined in “Acting out for Survival. Environmental Performance Poetry in the Pacific” by Paola Della Valle, who focuses on environmental artivism. As the author remarks, in the Southern Hemisphere activists have been engaging in public performances to denounce environmental emergencies and sensitise the public opinion. After introducing the climate crisis in the Pacific Rim and the rise of Pacific environmental performance poetry, Della Valle analyses the works by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, a writer and performer from the Marshall Islands, Terisa Siagatonu, a Samoan American poet from the Bay Area, and Eunice Andrada, a Filipina poet, educator, and social worker living in Australia. The three activists exemplify a committed type of artist/poet/performer who believes that art can inspire and create change and whose work is an emblem of connectivity between all the peoples of the Pacific Rim that share a common past of colonial exploitation.

The theme of ecology is pivotal also in Alessandro Vescovi’s paper, “Amitav Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama*. Writing Beyond the Novel”, where it is argued

that, even though the Indian writer has never described himself as a deep ecologist, his commitment to environmental issues can be considered as a good example of what Arne Naess defines as ‘ecosophy’. Moreover, the scholar claims that with *Jungle Nama*, a graphic verse novel turned into an audiobook and a musical, Ghosh abandons his anthropological gaze to become an activist exploring the multimodal possibilities of textuality. The Jungle Nama Project is indeed a way of raising public awareness on the limits of the Western episteme so as to promote the values of those who attune their lives to the rhythms and demands of the Earth. Vescovi further discusses how Ghosh experiments with new ways of translating and rewriting Indian mythology through verse, image, music, and theatre. As a matter of fact, in *Jungle Nama* Bengali is translated into the language of world literature and folk iconography is similarly rewritten in the language of world art.

In “World Bank Language and Neoliberal Global Capitalism in Mohsin Hamid’s and Aravind Adiga’s ‘Literary Provocations’”, Federica Zullo explores counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in the construction and reconstruction of our understanding of global economic processes. After focusing on the relationship between the World Bank and Indian society and assessing how postcolonial studies engages with the economic and political texts of multinational corporations, the author analyses Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), where it is possible to observe and recognise the application of Bankspeak in different ways. On the one hand, Hamid’s ‘pseudo-self-help book’ relies on the vocabulary of the first Bank Reports, whereas, on the other, Adiga’s novel displays the more recent language of finance, information technology, outsourcing, and digitisation. According to Zullo, both novels critically reconfigure the globalised trope of ‘Rising Asia’ and subvert both the figure of the neoliberal entrepreneur and the rhetoric of global capitalism.

Roberta Cimarosti’s article, “Challenging Language. A Study of ‘Opposition’ in Five Political Essays by Arundhati Roy”, tackles Roy’s non-fiction production and its dialectic between power and powerlessness. *My Seditious Heart* – a collection of the political essays she published or delivered as public speeches in India and the United States between 1998 and 2018 – epitomises her activist struggle against the Indian government’s nationalistic policies and propaganda of the last decades. In the paper, a selection of key passages foregrounding oppositional structures are analysed from the perspective of Lesley Jeffries’ opposition theory to demonstrate that Roy challenges the idea of an oppositional language based on binaries by remodulating it through semantic nuances that ultimately contribute to a shift in language use. Cimarosti demonstrates that, even in its most drastic use of ‘opposites’, Roy’s language is pervaded by a tendency to articulate a more complex cognitive condition of gradation and coexistence of contradictory terms and to employ ‘opposites’ in their grammatically realistic relation of

proximity and partial synonymy.

Koleka Putuma's decolonial counter-discourse is the subject of Maria Paola Guarducci's article, "Learning to Unlearn. Koleka Putuma's Poetry and Performances", in which she focuses on borders and boundaries – in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, class, and economic status – and on the possibility of creating new paradigms to narrate post-transitional South Africa. The author analyses *Collective Amnesia* (2017), a project that combines different kinds of art – poetry performances, video productions, theatre plays – and deals with memory and historical issues, especially slavery and the repressed presence of black women in South Africa. By questioning the past and the way its narration registers and/or erases memory, notions of identities are complicated and extended rather than standardised and circumscribed. Furthermore, collective 'unlearning' is analysed as a central practice in the processes of decolonising the South African archive and rewriting history/ies from female, feminist, and queer perspectives. As a matter of fact, Guarducci posits that in contexts where sources are unwritten, scarce, dubious, or biased the creative power of an artist can definitely be more effective than the work of a historian.

Linguistic/geopolitical bias and the lack of gender equality are the focus of "Changing the Landscape. Diversity and Translated Fiction in the UK Publishing Industry" by Helen Vassallo and Chantal Wright. The authors aim to identify some of the factors contributing to the lack of diversity in literature translated into English through the lens of two activist initiatives they have been directly involved with, i.e. the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation established by Wright at the University of Warwick and Vassallo's collaboration with PEN, a worldwide writers' association that facilitates and promotes the translation into English of works in foreign languages. While these activist operations, the authors argue, have been crucial in raising awareness of imbalances in the commission and publication of literature in translation, it is important that they manage to fulfil their true diversity potential, changing rather than reproducing the systems in which they seek to intervene. Moreover, Vassallo and Wright agree that for the field to truly advance, researchers and stakeholders need to work together, focusing not only on the circulation of texts and the role of translators, but also on the people allowing that circulation to happen or preventing it from happening.

The presence and visibility of diversity within the publishing industry is also the focus of Anastasia Parise's article. In "Activist Translations in Italy. A Paratextual Analysis of Five Feminist and Queer Editorial Projects", the author discusses how Black feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights are promoted transnationally by small Italian activist publishers through translation and its paratexts, which become sites of activism. After selecting five translations whose source texts already belong to an activist project, Parise applies Katherine Batchelor's paratextual framework to analyse how their prefaces,

introductions, translators' and publishers' notes are spaces where authors, editors, translators, and scholars comment on activist issues and reflect on language and the practice of translation as a complementary form of social engagement. The discourse on intersectional feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights, as a matter of fact, entails a deconstruction of the language of patriarchy, which is particularly relevant when translating from a language that does not specify grammatical gender to one that does, and vice versa.

Nowadays, new forms of activism and protest are facilitated by the modalities of networked media, with a consequent change in the dynamics of discursive power in the participatory web. In "Performing and Translating Activism into Art. A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis", Michaela Quadraro explores the fluid modes of electronically mediated communication. In her analysis of Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal's performance at Chicago's Flatfile Gallery in May 2007, she demonstrates how artists and audiences acquire alternative ways of creating connections when digital media are embedded in artistic interventions. Bilal actually spent thirty-one days in one of the gallery's rooms under the 24-hour surveillance of a webcam connected to the web together with a robotic paintball gun that allowed the audience in the gallery and users online to shoot the artist with sticky yellow paint. The separation between 'comfort zones' and 'conflict zones' unsettled by the performance is visually and linguistically translated in the videos the artist posted on YouTube after each session and in the book *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008), which Quadraro examines by combining the tools of multimodal and critical discourse analysis.

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Bionotes: Lorena Carbonara is Associate Professor of English Linguistics and Translation Studies at the University of Calabria. She is a member of the transnational research group "S/murare il Mediterraneo" and of the Board of the Italian Association for the Study of Anglophone Cultures and Literatures (AISCLI). She also serves on the Editorial Board of the journal *Iperstoria. Studi di anglistica e americanistica*. She has published extensively in several national and international journals on Native American autobiography and cinema, the third-world women writers' community in the US, activism across the US/Mexico border and the Mediterranean, and ELF in migration contexts

Mirko Casagrande (PhD) is Associate Professor of English Linguistics and Translation Studies at the University of Calabria. His areas of research include onomastics, critical discourse studies, postcolonial and translation studies. He has published articles on gender and translation, ecocritical discourse analysis, multiculturalism and multilingualism in Canada, place and trade names. He has edited the volume *Names and Naming in the Postcolonial English-Speaking World* (2018) and authored the books *Traduzione e codeswitching come strategie discorsive del plurilinguismo canadese* (2010) and *Procedure di naming nel paesaggio linguistico canadese* (2013). He currently serves as Treasurer of the Italian Association for the Study of Anglophone Cultures and Literatures (AISCLI).

Authors' addresses: lorena.carbonara@unical.it; mirko.casagrande@unical.it

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