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Transdisciplinary Approaches to Activism across Texts and Genres

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TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO ACTIVISM ACROSS TEXTS AND GENRES
An Overview

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[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 (Rohades 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 Unites 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 artivists 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 artivism as a form of critical and/or political art occupying and contesting urban public spaces:

> One of [artivism'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 artivist 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 artivist 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-Dóminguez 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 artivism 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 artivists 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

Chiriacò 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 Chiriacò, the sound and vocal reflections that were built before and during the performance are an artivist 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 artivists 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 artivists 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 synonymity.

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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Mirko Casagranda (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 plurlinguismo 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).

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TRAVELLING MUSES
Women, Ancient Grammars, and Contemporary ARTivism in Refugees' Tales

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Abstract – This essay reflects on the issue of cultural translation as a 'third space', a site where, as Bhabha suggests, translation, decolonisation, and location or relocation are tied together (Bhabha, Rutherford 1990). A specific political stance is taken, and flexible critical tools – drawing on translation studies and cultural studies, migration studies, performance studies, visual studies, and film studies – are adopted to show some of the ways in which many contemporary artists have been trying to account for the risks, losses, difficulties, and hopes implied in forced migration. Within the context of the constant relocation that migrant people experience, the effort at developing a dialogic relationship between languages and cultures has been gradually shaping a 'grammar' of representation that is new but built on familiar signs and images. Particularly in the Mediterranean Sea, forced migration has been going on since ancient times, though the changes in its nature have multiplied the number of stranger-in-need, whatever their country of origin. The representation of the migrants of today through the alphabet provided by classical Greek literature is one of the strategies currently used in activist creative and political practices. It helps to translate the experience of migration adapting and reshaping stories that belong to the Western reservoir of myths and traditions and combining the creative drive with the need to be active in the political field. In what is currently defined 'ARTivism', the text/work of art becomes a political gesture and draws its meaning from a commitment to social justice (Pulitano 2022, pp. 1-21). The analysis that follows is primarily focused on two documentary films resulting from two theatrical experiences, both inspired by classical tragedies (Sophocles's *Antigone* and Euripides's *The Trojan Women*). It aims at showing how the blueprint offered by the classics builds up as a shared semiotic system connecting ancient Greece, contemporary Middle East, and the European audience of today.

Keywords: cultural translation; migrant theatre; documentary filmmaking; Syrian women; ARTivism.

1. Spartacus in disguise

"We need another Spartacus": these words sound surprising, framed within the context in which they are uttered and in connection with the person who speaks them. They are drawn from a recent documentary film by Benedetta Argentieri, *I Am the Revolution* (2018), developing around the life of three

women (an Afghan politician, a commander of the Syrian Democratic Army, and an Iraqi feminist). The person speaking is the Iraqi activist Yanar Mohamed, her voice interweaving with that of Selay Ghaffar, from Afghanistan, and Rojda Felat, from Syrian Kurdistan. Symbolically, in putting forward her testimonial, each of these women has 'become' a new Spartacus. Each of them has succeeded in transforming her vulnerability – as a social subject – into one more tool for addressing continuing injustices, as Spartacus did. The Greek hero, then, becomes a *sign* in a language that can translate east to west making a 'foreign' culture more understandable to the European audience. In practice, when putting forward the Spartacus metaphor, Yanar Mohamed chooses an alphabet – the classical one – that makes the 'text' of her fight more understandable to the West, though simplifying it. This translational act is encased in an artefact (a film) that is linguistically articulated at three levels: it is made by a Westerner (Benedetta Argentieri), spoken in English (neither the mother tongue of the three women nor of the director), and set in the Middle East. The film as a discourse on postcolonialism and power is therefore polysemic and polyvocal, openly political, and, in short, an act of artistic activism. What puts the message across, from the addresser to the addressee, is the communal knowledge we have – as Mediterranean people – of the stories, histories, and storytelling flourishing around this closed basin since ancient times. As Chambers points out, this is the site "where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia" (Chambers 2008, p. 3). I want to reflect on Chambers assumption of "the shifting currents and cultures of the Mediterranean" (Chambers 2008, p. 23) that "repeatedly draw our attention to the labor of translation: to confronting what arrives from abroad while simultaneously announcing the historical trauma of time that refuses to solidify in the existing state of knowledge" (Chambers 2008, p. 5).

Within this context, my analysis is aimed at showing how current ARTivism[1] finds a productive ground in the commonalities of stories that is being increasingly exploited to create a communal *grammar*. More often than not, the act of recovering a diachronic perspective capable of building a bridge with the remote past of the Mediterranean Sea has a double purpose: on the one hand, it reinforces the universal reasons and consequences of migration (loss of belonging, risk of death, fear, uprooting, and so on and so forth); on the other, it aims at composing a text in which ancient stories are bricks and mortar for building new visions and most of all a renewed form of solidarity. The process of recasting Greek myths or ancient tragedies can be

[1] In her *Mediterranean ARTivism*, Pulitano explains the origin of the term, locating it in a manifesto published as early as 1976, written by Carlos Almaraz within the frame of Chicano/a cultures. The text was included in an issue of *ChismeArte* (Pulitano 2022, p. 164).

seen as a kind of cultural translation (Baer 2020, p. 139): it includes language, but it also goes beyond it and produces a strong impact on the whole life and attitude of the people involved in the experience. As I hope to show, whenever the classics are recast in the context of current migrations, the resulting text is potently polyvocal and intensely rooted in the idea of a culture that is, literally, a 'network' of shared meanings (Williams 1961). While "transcreating the myth" – a definition used by Alessandra Rizzo in her analysis of *Queens of Syria* (Rizzo 2018, pp. 150-179) –, the participants in the recasting process are led to devise new codes, vitally connected to ancient times (hence the universal flavour), but also brand-new in the cultural and linguistic hybridisation they require (hence the specificity of each artistic work). However diversified the exploitation of the classics in the current narrative of migration may be, the recasting process is grounded in one purpose: connecting the West and the rest of the world and therefore starting the process towards a new understanding of the very notion of otherness.

A step in this direction and a meaningful example of what may happen to an average elderly, middle class, educated Western man when he is put in touch with the world of refugee seekers is provided by Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015). The protagonist of the novel, Richard, is a retired professor of Classics. In need of something useful to do with his free time, he starts working as a volunteer in a refugee centre for migrants in Berlin. At a loss when facing a universe totally unfamiliar to him, he finds in the classical Greek stories of gods and heroes a bridge and an imaginary repertoire making it possible for him to communicate with the African refugees. What he used to teach to his students is gradually transformed into a shared alphabet, where the myth of the Gorgon can be adapted to the paradigms of Berber mythology (Erpenbeck 2015, p. 180) and the writings of Seneca, Plato, Ovid, Empedocles become useful in approaching the issues of reception, hospitality, and integration (Erpenbeck 2015, p. 299). In so doing, Richard literally *creates* a new grammar and a new language that allow him to communicate with people coming from the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 72-74). The notion of translation as world culture is obviously implied here, but even more relevant appears the opportunity that narratives of this kind offer to view the current situation in a different, less West-centred light.

This possibility seems to be very much the focus of narratives set on the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea and portraying the journey northward from the former colonial African world. The play *Lampedusa* (2015), by Anders Lustgarten, develops around the clash between the ancient solidarity among people living on the coasts of this closed basin and the resistance to a tragedy that is unacceptable from the ethic point of view and unbearable from the economic and social one. The play is composed of two alternating

monologues, developing in totally different settings: Denise, a debt collector, lives on the outskirts of Leeds and experiences the fear, hate, and unease of poor Western people towards the migrants (who steal their jobs and women, as the saying goes), while Stefano is a fisherman from Lampedusa. This latter character is particularly relevant for my purposes here. A seaman of a family of seamen, Stefano is now doomed to recover dead bodies in the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of his own descent, Stefano inherits the legacy of the sea as a blood tie that is not to be broken. As he proudly declares, "My father was a fisherman. And his father before him. And before and before. I always thought, always knew, I'd make my living at sea" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 7). To account for his devotion, he goes back to the ancient times when the Mediterranean Sea was "Caesar's highway" and could be literally taken as "the origin of the world. Hannibal's road to glory" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 3). Over time, however, what Gilroy defines the "colonial hydrarchy" (2014, p. 51) of the past has proved an increasingly catastrophic process, transforming the source of life and beauty into a gigantic grave. Now that "the Med is dead" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 7), Stefano works at recovering corpses from the sea, drowned migrants who were trying to reach safety and did not make it. He does not stop belonging to the sea and finding there the source of his identity, but at the same time – as sadly happens in the real world – he constantly tries to recast the ancient meaning of the Mediterranean Sea as life and beauty into a totally different present. And again, the only possible rescue strategy resides in relationships, the network of shared human universal values. For Stefano, the encounter with the other – the Malian refugee Modibo – is mediated by a common belonging to the same history and a shared ability to resist the tragedy in the name of the commonality determined by their being both Mediterranean people. Fragile as this assumption may be (as the saying goes, "una faccia, una razza" [same face, same race]), it states a new principle of hope (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 77-79).

Newness always keeps a relation to the past. In this respect, it does exist a strong connection of the current narratives with the ancient Greek myths. These latter, however, have to be recollected and relocated in the grammar of the current world. Memories are the focus of John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010). This poetic cine-essay on the Black Diaspora in the British Midlands chooses as a guideline the epic of Homer and more specifically the figures of the muses: each section of the film is devoted to one of them. The muses belong to Greek mythology and represent the power of memory. Recontextualised in the rainy, cold landscapes of England and articulated through a great quantity of intermedial references, they provide a tool to understanding the process of Black Diaspora within the universal dimension of the experience of exile. The historical process that is portrayed here – the one related to the so-called 'Windrush Generation' – is by no

means understandable if not embedded in the line of time. The ushering of wave after wave of migrants from former British colonies to a nation in deep economic crisis, after World War II, does not differ from the journey of economic migrants to the Greek poleis. That ancient story actually anticipates the issues currently experienced in Europe, and in Italy in particular, where migration is fiercely resisted though at the same time intensely needed to support the economy.

The fact that the core of the process appears to have stayed unchanged over a great length of time must not hide or remove the awareness that the current migrations are different, and they emphatically call for new codes. In all the works and artistic projects mentioned so far, however different they may be, there is a common tension towards the creation of a renewed grammar that is shaped by recasting the classics into a brand-new context, where the exile takes on a different flavour, though still rooted in the same basic conceptual paradigms. We are all Mediterranean people, whatever it means. We are not exactly the same, but the artists I am considering in my work, and the case studies that follow, try to draw on similarities rather than differences. In *The Return of Odysseus*, Irad Malkin reflects on "the ambivalence implied in exploration and protocolonization" (Malkin 1998, p. 4) and points out that the imagined community of the Mediterranean Sea holds up to a point. To work properly in the artistic and activist practice, this commonality is to be reshaped: it keeps the same starting point – for example, a classical tragedy – but needs the revitalising contribution of new languages, born from the old ones.

The Greek princesses and queens now come from postcolonial or neocolonial countries.

2. The two Antigones

Sophocles' *Antigone* was written and performed in 441 BCE. The original tragedy, belonging to the Theban trilogy, tells the story of Antigone, who disobeys the new ruler of Thebes, Creon, by deciding to bury her brother Polynices. The act is a crime because it goes against the prohibition of the king, who wants to refuse burial since Polynices had fought against the city. When caught and brought to face the ruler, Antigone denies none of her acts and is sentenced to death. Haemon, the son of King Creon and Antigone's beloved, tries to save her but fails and consequently kills himself.

Patently enough, the tragedy is not only a story of brotherly love and lovers' mutual devotion but also a reflection on the conflict between the law of the state and the law of the heart. Probably for this reason, the play has often been recast and adapted to approach the same topic in different contexts. A version of Sophocles's tragedy is the central focus of a play by

South African Athol Fugard, *The Island* (1973), where two cellmates on Robben Island, while preparing a performance of *Antigone*, exploit the ancient text as a symbolic canvas to tell the story of the injustice they are suffering. Another equally effective version of Antigone's myth is told in a novel by Mexican writer Sara Uribe, *Antigòna Gonzales* (2012), which develops around a strong female character frantically searching for her brother Tadeo, connected with drug trafficking and suddenly disappeared.

In 2017, when Ubah Cristina Ali Farah chooses the same tragedy as the hub of her theatrical project, she is fully aware of the previous artistic experiences. A Somali-born refugee currently based in Belgium but living in Italy at the time, she decides to collaborate with the director Giuseppe Massa and the Cultural Association Sutta Scupa, to organise a theatrical workshop involving both professionals and real-life migrants. Understandably, the purpose is double: the play is helping the migrants to face and possibly overcome the trauma of exile and at the same time is contributing to help first the professionals and then the audience to understand the fate of migrants framing it in the familiar classical tragedy of a woman willing to bury her rebellious brother against the rules of the king. The text of the play collates fragments of the original tale and testimonies of the refugees.[2] This creative strategy seems to be effective: Ali Farah, Giuseppe Massa, and the actresses and actors succeed in showing the absurdity of a law when it is applied with no respect for the compassion, piety, sorrow, trauma that accompany the death of a beloved relative. Antigone faces her fate unveiling the hypocrisy of king Creon's position:

> ANTIGONE: Non parlate del destino voi, ma piuttosto di chi mi condanna, innocente. Voi che avete seguito Creonte nella sua guerra di invasione, voi che fingendo di esportare la democrazia non siete interessati che a difendere le vostre ricchezze e a rapinare gas e petrolio, vedrete le stive delle vostre navi tornare non piene, ma vuote.[3] (*Quadro* 8)

The connection to the current process that has brought exiles and refugee seekers to the coasts of Italy is made here, by Antigone herself, who later on adds: "Nessuno accoglie più gli esuli o i naufraghi che la tempesta getta sulla spiaggia come relitti o tesori" [Nobody welcomes the exiles or the castaways the storm throws on the beach like wrecks or treasures anymore] (*Quadro* 9). Her ability to feel a form of commonality with the forgotten works as a fitting

[2] The script does not exist in print. It was sent to me by the author herself. The tragedy is divided into nine *quadri* [frames]. In the following quotations from the script, I am keeping this reference to make it possible to identify specific sections of the play.

[3] [ANTIGONE: Do not speak of fate but rather of those who condemn me, innocent. You who followed Creon in his invasion, you who pretend to export democracy but are only keen on defending your riches and plundering gas and oil, you will see the holds of your ships return not full, but empty].

reply to the chorus, which translates the shared reaction of the community and the politically enforced common sense evoking the traditional fear of invasion:

> CORO: I clandestini penetreranno i nostri confini e invaderanno le nostre case, prenderanno le nostre mogli e sgozzeranno i nostri figli, il cielo striato, il sole dietro una grata.[4] (*Quadro* 6)

Antigone Power was performed in 2018, with the support of the Municipality of Palermo. The audience perceived the familiarity of the classical grammar and at the same time they were brought to see the universal aspects of the tragedy occurring today in the Mediterranean Sea. Ali Farah is an exile herself. She can fully understand the many ways in which the fact of having been obliged to leave one's motherland implies a dual impulse: the desire to be 'integrated' in the country of arrival and an intense commitment to the culture and tradition of one's motherland. Negotiating between these two drives is not easy. Cultural translation can provide some effective tools, though, as Sakai and Solomon remind us, universalism and particularity tend to interweave in unpredictable ways (Sakai, Solomon 2006, pp. 150-153). What is to be fought is the ever-present tendency – basically human and therefore understandable – to reduce the stranger to a generalising stereotype (Sakai, Solomon 2006, pp. 155-160). Individualisation exercises a strong resistance against the tendency to simply 'transport' the other into a Western context (Vallorani 2017, p. 43-59). The resilience of 'the foreign' – meaning both foreign human beings and foreign forms of culture – is not only to be taken into account but also understood and accepted.

"We are not princesses" – states one of the six refugee women protagonists of a recent artistic work resembling Ali Farah's *Antigone Power* – "No one knows us nor would say anything if we died. Even in death there is inequality" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 01:09:30-01:09:37). The quotation is drawn from one of the last sequences of Itab Azzam and Bridgette Auger's *We Are Not Princesses*, a documentary film released in 2018 and combining realistic scenes and animation. The film develops around the story of six brave women, all of them Syrian, living as refugees in Beirut. All of them are involved in a theatrical project aimed at recasting Sophocles's tragedy in a play with a new title, openly positing similarities and differences: *Antigone of Syria*. The film results from the experience of working on the play at the same time giving voice to the tales of loss, love, desperation, but also hope that the women carry with them.[5]

[4] [Clandestine migrants will enter our borders and invade our homes, take our wives and slaughter our children, the sky streaked, the sun behind a grate].

[5] All the three performances of the play took place in Beirut at Al Madina Theatre in 2014.

The documentary opens on a sequence of rehearsal: Israa, one of the characters, is trying to memorise a part of the play while standing at a window. In the background, we see the dilapidated landscape of Beirut and we hear the sound of men at work:

> ISRAA: Antigone is to be taken to a deserted place and imprisoned in a cave. They will leave her very little food and she will die there, slowly. Honouring the dead is a noble thing, but those in power do not tolerate being disobeyed. Your strong will has led you astray […] Chill out man! I'm rehearsing here. Get out of there. (Azzam, Auger 2018, 00:10-00:47)

The everyday life of a refugee and the effort to frame it into a more universal and timeless tragedy – that of forced migration – combine through the interweaving of personal recollections and segments of the original, classical play. The film is divided into sections, each devoted to one of the women.

Fedwa and Heba are mother and daughter. Fedwa lost a son as a martyr, and she was not given the possibility to attend his funeral. Heba takes care of a cat which ironically "has a passport, his health certificate and he is vaccinated" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 05:48). Israa is a rapper and cherishes the high-heeled shoes she wears when she runs away from Lebanon or when she visits relatives: she hopes they will take her to freedom. Mona is mother to two children. She is introduced at the beginning of the film, with her kids and husband, who playfully objects to her wearing eyeshadow and smoking in front of the camera. Zayna, married at 14 and now 19, loses her face veil in her first few days in Beirut and is forbidden to go out: "No face veil, no going out" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 21:00). When she eventually succeeds in getting permission to take her sick child to a doctor, she dreams of being "a bird in a cage that had been freed. I wish that I had wings so I could fly back to Syria" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 23:21-23:35). Wafa, now 29 and married at 15, is mother to five children and feels she resembles Haemon because she has been deprived of the possibility of romantic love. All of the women inflect Antigone's tale so as to be able to tell *their own* experiences, but they are fully aware that "Antigone's story is written, completed and finished. But we're still writing our stories" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 55:07-55:24). They feel they have literally become the characters in the play, and they recast the tragedy in their own experience of refugees:

> "I've become Antigone".
> "Do you think Antigone smoked?"
> […]
> "She definitely smoked".
> "I only started when my brother died. I didn't smoke much before".
> (Azzam, Auger 2018, 24:45-26:44).

In terms of language, too, the film is hybrid. It is spoken in Arabic and

subtitled in English. The names of the women are also given in both languages. So, in the in-between space created by the theatrical workshop, a new language is gradually being shaped, and it is fruitfully connected to the shared past, though recast in the world of today. The hybrid memory bank that is built through this kind of artistic projects is a composite archive, where memory becomes an active method of resistance. The play had an enormous impact, both in terms of the work leading up to it and in the actual performance. It changed the lives of the people involved in the experience and it also helped the audience to create relations between the ancient tale and the current situation.

3. Proud queens

A similar process of cultural, linguistic, and symbolic translation is the key to a more complex project. Started in 2013 by Charlotte Eagan and William Stirling through a partnership between Refuge Production and Oxfam, *The Trojan Women Project* is currently one of the most active initiatives involving refugees of different origins in theatrical projects related to Euripides's *The Trojan Women* and resulting in theatrical performances touring around Britain in the following years. One of the first steps of the project took place in a Jordanian refugee camp, in the fall of 2013. Just over 50 refugee women from Syria were involved in a theatrical workshop primarily meant to help them cope with the sense of loss, anomy, and desperation springing from their having been obliged to leave a country in war. The group was led to approach and then stage *The Trojan Women* in a play that in fact premiered in 2016 and was directed by Zoe Lafferty. The operation was built up on the analogies between the past and present condition of the Syrian refugee women involved in the project and the fate of Hecuba, Cassandra, and the others.

What appeared clear right from the beginning was precisely the wide spectrum of analogies between the fate of Euripides's Trojan queens and princesses, doomed to become slaves at the end of the war, and the condition of Syrian women crossing the border and hoping to reach safety. The original play dates back to 315 BCE. Focused on the Peloponnesian war and conceived as a protest against the Athenian crimes, the tragedy is easily intended as an antiwar play. Even the dynamics of the war, if you look at it, are quite similar to what is happening in many ongoing conflicts, both in Europe and in other continents: an independent island refuses to accept subjugation, and as a consequence its resistance is brutally crushed. The men are killed, and the women and children enslaved. What makes the difference in Euripides's tragedy as well as in the *Trojan Women Project* is the point of view that is chosen. These are the disasters of war seen through a female

gaze. In the same way as Antigone may easily reflect and provide a blueprint for an updated representation of the conflict between law and empathy, the Trojan women end up by portraying the war as death and destruction, and this kind of representation can effectively highlight the plight of Syrian refugee women. In more ways than one, Euripides's classical tragedy *The Trojan Women* literally becomes, in this project, a *grammar* to translate the journey and condition of Syrian women, leaving behind them – like Hecuba, Cassandra, and the others – their cities turned to dust and their men killed or imprisoned. Translation – and a revised notion of both the word and the process – comes into play here. More than anything else, what comes front stage in the process is the role of Syrian women, literally *becoming* active agents of translation and therefore pushing towards the revision of translation theory and practice that Loredana Polezzi suggests in her *Translation and Migration* (Polezzi 2012, p. 353).

Though the theatrical performance is the final purpose of the workshop, I want to work primarily on a by-product of it: the documentary film resulting from sequences shot as backstage of the work on Euripides's tragedy. Yasmin Fedda's *Queens of Syria* (2014) documents the making of the play in the Jordanian camp closely and beautifully, providing an insight into the process leading to the final performance. In approaching the text, I want to go back to the notion of translation as declined by a robust line of thinking that approaches the study of 'the contemporary' from the vantage point of the aftermath of European colonialism and within the frame of Mignolo's decoloniality as a "project that encompasses both, as Fanon puts it, the colonized and the colonizer and therefore, emancipation and liberation" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 457). We know that ARTivism, as the neologism implies, consists in producing artistic works resulting from a political commitment to determine a change in unfair social conditions, and, as Carlos Almaraz suggests in his manifesto, "art could be the catalyst to produce that change" (Almaraz 1976, p. 50). Within this frame and focusing on the issue of current migrations, a preliminary awareness of the role, weight, and long-term consequences of colonial power is needed. The epistemic privileges focused on by Mignolo (2009, p. 3) also requires the transdisciplinary approach adopted by Pierpaolo Frassinelli in his *Borders, Media Crossings and Translations* (2020). The issue of language as a dialogic tool comes forefront and calls for new perspectives. As Rafael claims, "[a] metalanguage is thus a medium for meditating upon mediation and mediumship, allowing you to reflect on reflection" (Rafael 2016, p. 7).

Strictly speaking, *Queens of Syria* uses three languages: the original play, in Greek, is translated into Arabic, and the film is spoken in Arabic and subtitled in English. To this, the languages of cinema are to be added, which means visuals, point of view, casting, montage and editing, soundtrack. The resulting text is understandably polyvocal and interweaves different codes,

positing translation as a complex, multivocal process. Within this theoretical horizon,

> the reflection on translation as the location, or articulation, of a non-national idea of culture has become central in translation studies, literary studies, and postcolonial studies. In its earlier definition, cultural translation emerged as the modus operandi of postcolonial and diasporic cultures, cultures that can be pictured as translations with no retrievable originals and whose system of values is caught in a wandering status between the precolonial, the colonial, and postcolonial or diasporic orders of knowledge and existence. (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, p. 26)

I want to see if the operation taking place along the process – which I consider in all respects a translation – satisfies the requirements of what Homi Bhabha re-defines as the '*Aufgabe*' of the translator in his very recent re-reading of Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" (2021). What I want to understand is this: in the actual performative practice, how does *Queens of Syria* exploit the 'grammar' of a Greek tragedy as a system of signs familiar to the European audience? And, if in this case the '*Aufgabe*' of the translator consists in providing an effective representation of forced migration today as to make it approachable and understandable, does this translation "liv[e] up to its aspiration and duties" (Bhabha 2021, p. xi)?

I think it does. The Syrian women, situated in Jordan in precarious living conditions, act in the play, and in so doing they translate – both linguistically and culturally – their experience for the Western public into the words and acts of Euripides's *Trojan Women*. The process is bidirectional: the Trojan women are re-coded as current refugees, and the Syrian women are put into the shoes of the Trojan deportees. The '*Aufgabe*' of translation is, for the Syrian women, a form of self-articulation and agency. It does not normalise their experience, but it proposes "new ways of 'seeing' and 'hearing' each other" (Inghilleri 2017, p. 27).

In a sequence of the film (Fedda 2014, 28:22-31:00), an extremely moving and meaningful moment of the theatrical workshop is portrayed. The Syrian women are encouraged to draw maps of their journey, somehow adding further specificity to the etymological meaning of the Latin *transducere*, which also conveys, according to Polezzi, the sense of a forced relocation and implies at least the threat of violence (Polezzi 2012, p. 349). The telling of each individual journey through words and images is a story of translation and losses, differently articulated for each woman and collectively felt as a tragedy. There is no hierarchy of grief: only differences. In some cases, the refugee women have to be helped to write because they cannot do it by themselves: they need a 'translator' able to put their words into written form. A multiple process of encoding/decoding – quoting Stuart Hall's description of the journey of discourse (1993, pp. 90-103) – is openly at play

here. The interweaving of oral/written language, drawings, discussion, collaborative production of texts, and cooperative construction of a new play (Middle Eastern) from an old one (Western) account for a notion of language that is mobile, flexible, constantly reshaped, and explicitly 'accented'. I am borrowing this last term (*accented*) from Anita Starosta, who labels as "accented criticism" a "new orientation for humanistic inquiry" (Starosta 2013, p. 174) where translation is intended not as normalisation but quite the opposite: litmus paper to make irreducible differences more visible. In this version of *The Trojan Women*, we recognise, as Westerners, a familiar paradigm (women and children as war victims), but we also fully understand that what we are watching is a Greek tragedy 'accented' in Arabic. The Syrian women literally become active agents of translation (Polezzi 2012, p. 353), working on "a sense of commonality that has been developing since ancient times among the civilizations flourishing around (and mostly because of) the sea and that has gradually shaped the feeling that we do belong to the same race" (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 69-70). At the same time, the fact that some refugee women appropriate an ancient Western text and reshape it represents an effective reaction to the Western tendency to superimpose some pre-digested and culturally authorised stereotypes onto the identities of the other. The Bakhtinian 'outsidedness' often quoted by Polezzi (2012, p. 354) is kept unchanged and raises serious questions about the very notion of 'foreignness' and its supposed normalisation. In short, in the process of combining a Greek masterpiece and a current tragedy, *Queens of Syria* functions as a multilayered translated text, resulting in a political gesture, able to interrogate, through art, the policy regulating refugees care and resettlement in Europe. It also encourages us to keep the 'fact of translation' front and centre in any discussion of migration proposing a multilingual and multicultural testimonial to the experience of Syrian women, both ordinary and high-rank, exploiting a far more ancient artistic document focused on a different but similar tragedy and involving different but similar women. It is new but *not* new. And it may lead to the "understanding of translation as a complex generative site of negotiation and world-making, the very place at which 'newness enters the world'" (Baer 2020, p. 158).[6]

Translation as a metaphor and a process that is at the same time transitional and translational vitally relates to migration. The act of "carrying over" amounts to displacement as "transportation, slavery, colonization" (Hall 1994, p. 228).

Over time, what Farrier defines as "a form of double-voiced discourse" (Farrier 2011, p. 6) multiplies in a rhizomatic collection of voices, texts, languages, and translations, all of them witnessing the collective effort to

[6] Here Baer is quoting – and partly criticising – Bhabha (1994).

give a political voice to current migrancy. The specificity of the context I am referring to adds further complexities to this line of reasoning. Slowly developed into a collection of global smuggling hubs, the Mediterranean Sea is the site where, diachronically, a broad reservoir of images and myths related to migrations have developed over time, interweaving and unravelling around internal and international forms of displacement.

Queens of Syria gets a grip on a whole set of myths and stories, in the version provided by an ancient Greek dramatist, and exploits it as a metaphor and a Rosetta stone to translate a current experience. Does this mean using translation as a metaphor? Bhabha, Hall, and Rushdie would probably say yes. However, I would suggest that the implications are more complex: abusing the use of translation as a metaphor would probably result in oversimplification and ultimately risk of neutralizing the political impact of the operation. *Queens of Syria* is not relevant because Euripides's tragedy is exploited as a metaphor to translate the suffering of Syrian women, but because, starting from the realisation of a general, maybe universal analogy, the text proceeds to see what happens if you switch from Greek to Arabic (and to drawings, gestures, performative actions) while framing the process of staging the play in the context of the director's task, which consists not only and not simply in translating an ancient text but also in performing a series of complex operations, namely convincing the women, examining their experiences, reassuring them, listening to them, restoring their freedom of expression. In short, *respecting* them and their being 'foreigners'.

Foreign is the female body whose face is covered or faded in the process of editing the film: it is not foreign in itself, in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, age, but because it maintains the 'signs' of a different culture, signs that stand out when invading the European scene and re-speaking European words. In this process, the theatrical scene epitomises the border as the place where, according to Bhabha, "something begins its 'presencing'" (Bhabha 1994, p. 7).

The *Trojan Women Project* is still ongoing. A new documentary, *The World to Hear* (Ginsborg, Sloan 2017), focuses on the production of the *Trojan Women*, on tour in the UK and directed by Zoe Lafferty. Co-produced by the Young Vic Theatre, the play involves 13 women from the original play, who in the meanwhile have succeeded in obtaining visas to come to the UK. The film, directed by Charlotte Ginsborg and Anatole Sloan and commissioned by Trojan Women Scotland, reports on the tour of the play around Britain, thus focusing on the relations between the Syrian women and the British audience and again providing reflections on the cultural process of translating the experience of forced migration for a Western public.

Polezzi emphatically claims that a "connection between migration, translation and political action" is now a must-do: "we need to investigate

how these three items throw some light on the biopolitics of language" (Polezzi 2012, p. 347). In this respect, both *We Are Not Princesses* and *Queens of Syria* offer a number of examples of the possible ways of engaging oneself in staging actions to change policies, or locate humanitarian, political, and even financial responsibilities for the enormous tragedy taking place around and in the Mediterranean Sea (Pulitano 2022, pp. 23-40). The interweaving of oral/written language, drawings, discussion, collaborative production of texts and cooperative construction of a new play (Middle Eastern) from an old one (Western) account for a notion of language that is mobile, flexible, constantly reshaped, and explicitly 'accented', i.e. able to provide "new orientation for humanistic inquiry" (Starosta 2013, p. 174), where translation is intended not as normalisation but quite the opposite: litmus paper to make irreducible differences more visible, therefore a new grammar for ARTivism.

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POETRY, SOUND, RESISTANCE
Kamau Brathwaite's Jazz Aesthetics

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Abstract – Brathwaite's is a poetry in which words are conceived as pure sound; it is a space inhabited by musical echoes coming from Africa and America, in which Caribbean music, jazz, and blues redefine themselves. This fascinating migration of musical expressions, which the author enacts in his oeuvre, translates the sense and meaning of a personal life suspended between different geographies and cultures. Brathwaite's trilogy entitled *The Arrivants* (1973) represents a complex investigation of the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean, in which the discovery of a dialogical relationship with the African continent allows Caribbean people to *rewrite* their own identity. Besides Caribbean music, a fundamental resource and language within the economy of Brathwaite's trilogy is represented by African American Jazz. Brathwaite defines jazz in contrast with the earlier blues of slave culture. To him, jazz is the sound, the voice, and the music of the 'emancipated Negro'; jazz has been from the beginning a cry from the heart of the hurt man, which can also be heard in the saxophone and trumpet of many performers. But the affirmation of such a genre does not come from the individual voice, but from the ensemble, the merging of the various instruments. In choosing jazz, Brathwaite chooses a cultural expression that represents a modern black experience in its movement from slavery to freedom, and from countryside to metropolis. Jazz provides a system of languages that voice the modernist sense of alienation, chaos, disillusionment and hope that characterises not only African American or West Indian literature but all subaltern cultures in the world. Such an approach blurs national borders, invoking a communal cultural/literary/musical experience of resistance.

Keywords: Caribbean poetry; Brathwaite; jazz; resistance; sound.

1. Introducing Brathwaite's poetry: on Africa and the Caribbean

In Kamau Brathwaite's poetry, words are conceived as pure sound, allowing a musical understanding and *inter-standing*[1] of – and *in* – reality; it is performance poetry which asks for an improvised response, preserving the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each listening. During the 1971 Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

[1] Brathwaite used the expression *inter-standing* during a 2008 conference in Kingston – *Crossroads ACS 2008* – to voice his desire to deconstruct and *resist* to the colonial logic of *under*standing based on a vertical approach to knowledge.

(ACLALS), hosted for the first time by the University of the West Indies in Jamaica (UWI Mona), Brathwaite urged writers "to abandon the exclusivity of an imported literary canon and to immerse themselves in the oral folk traditions of a predominantly African-descended populace" (Kalliney 2016, p. 92). In this sense, if another great Caribbean poet, namely Nobel prize winner Derek Walcott, in his intertextual approach seems to privilege literature over other discursive modes (as in the case of his 1990 long poem *Omeros*, with its debts to Western myths and models), Brathwaite's pages nourish not only of oral stories but also of musical sounds, i.e. timbres, melodies, and rhythms coming from at least two continents, namely Africa and America, trying to convey the sense of the fascinating *dia-logic* which connects jazz, blues, and Caribbean music (in particular calypso and reggae). This complex migration of poetical and musical expressions, which the author stages in his work, expresses the sense and meaning of a personal life suspended between different continents and cultures.

Born in 1930 in Barbados, Brathwaite attended Harrison College, where he won one of the prestigious state scholarships which in 1949 took him to Pembroke College, Cambridge, to read History. In England, Brathwaite felt "neglected and misunderstood" (Morris 1995, p. 117); indeed, he wrote poems which were systematically rejected by the Cambridge magazines. After graduation, he moved to Ghana (1955) for a long job experience; here Brathwaite attained "awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society" (Morris 1995, p. 118). When he went back home, he discovered how he had never really left Africa: "that it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean" (Morris 1995, p. 118). The English exile was followed by a proper homecoming; the passage to Africa translated the Caribbean of his adolescence into a different place in which he felt a full sense of belonging to a space which was and still is involved in a continuous process of translation and dialogic interaction with the African continent. On his arrival back in the Caribbean he felt he had performed and accomplished the triangular trade – Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean – of his historical origins.

Brathwaite returned to Europe, and more specifically to London, in the mid-1960s, where, as an intellectual and social activist, he founded the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) with other Caribbean activists – interestingly, CAM grew out of a small informal meeting of West Indian intellectuals in Brathwaite's basement flat in London in 1966. The seminal debates that took place within the movement on the very shape and meaning of the "artistic production among members of the Caribbean exile community in Britain" (Dawson 2007, p. 73) involved key intellectuals such as Andrew Salkey, Stuart Hall, and John La Rose – in 1966 the latter founded New Beacon Books, the first Caribbean publishing house in England, which published seminal works by Brathwaite himself. As James notes, when CAM as an

organisation ended in 1972, not only had it "made a major impact on the emergence of a Caribbean cultural identity, [but it had also] changed attitudes within the host community" (James 2010, p. 210). CAM had had a major influence on other poets and activists, such as dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, in whose 1975 poem "It Dread inna Inglan" the poet/griot and his community speak in defence of poor George Lindo, a Jamaican worker living in Bradford who was wrongfully convicted of armed robbery.

Brathwaite's trilogy entitled *The Arrivants* (1973) – which includes the three collections of poems *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969) – represents a complex investigation of the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean. As Brown puts it,

> the theme of the trilogy is that of re-birth, re-discovery, reclamation of identity for West Indian people through an examination of their roots in the African past. In all his work Brathwaite explores the ways in which an acceptance of those roots will begin to heal the negative self-images established by the experience of middle-passage, plantation and colonial life. (Brown 1995, pp. 9-10)

In short, the discovery of a deep and dialogical relationship with the African continent allows Caribbean people to *rewrite* their own identity. As Morris observes in the first volume of the trilogy, *Rights of Passage*, "we meet personas of the New World Negro, the dislocated African, forever on the move and with little memory of ancestral Africa" (Morris 1995, p. 119); it is basically a collection about the African diaspora and about the quest for the meaning of a difficult Caribbean present.

The second collection, *Masks*, portrays a return to the African past and stands as a poetic translation of Brathwaite's personal experience, which here is presented in terms of a double mask. We have on the one side a journey within African history and culture, which is exemplified by the poem entitled "The Making of the Drum", in which Brathwaite sings of the uniqueness and holiness of the voice of the African drum; on the other side, we have a journey performed by a Caribbean black man, who looks for signs of his own belonging to the African continent without finding any; in this sense, in the poem entitled "The New Ships" we read:

> I travelled to a distant town
> I could not find my mother
> I could not find my father
> I could not hear the drum
> (Brathwaite 1973, p. 125)

And yet the African experience will positively affect the poem's protagonist, who will become stronger and self-aware.

The last section of the trilogy, *Islands,* focuses on the quest, discovery, and valorisation of the presence of African elements in Caribbean culture and

includes Brathwaite's most famous poem "Limbo", in which the image of this Caribbean dance recounts both the coloniser's oppression upon the slaves and the slaves' capacity of resistance, questioning this very oppression through music (conveyed again by the reference to the African drum) and dance:

> knees spread wide
> and the dark ground is under me
>
> down
> down
> down
>
> and the drummer is calling me
>
> limbo
> limbo like me
>
> sun coming up
> and the drummers are praising me
>
> out of the dark
> and the dumb gods are raising me
>
> up
> up
> up
> and the music is saving me
> (Brathwaite 1973, p. 195)

The kind of resistance evoked here projects towards radical art forms such as reggae – one is reminded of Bob Marley's 1970 song entitled "400 years", a powerful meditation on slavery – and dub poetry – we are referring in particular to Linton Kwesi Johnson's album *Bass Culture* (1980).[2] Commenting on the collection's triadic structure and on its dialogical aspect, Brathwaite affirms:

> [I]t was really a matter of raising an issue, replying to that issue and trying to create a synthesis. In other words, the first question which is in *Rights of Passage*, is: How did we get into the Caribbean? Our people, the black people of the Caribbean – what was the origin of their presence in the Caribbean? And the antithesis to that was – well, the answer to that which emerged was that they came out of migration out of Africa, so that the second movement on the trilogy was the answer to that question. We came out of Africa. Hence, *Masks.* And then, we came out of Africa and went into the New World. Hence, *Islands*. So

[2] On this aspect, see also Martino (2019). On Brathwaite's aesthetics, see also Martino (2012, 2015).

> the trilogic form is based upon the question, an answer and resolution of that answer into a third book. (Brathwaite in Mackey 1995, p. 13)

Nelson reads Brathwaite's commitment to the triadic dimension as a musical organising principle and sees the author ready to experiment with a nine-movement symphony. In his essay entitled "The Music of Kamau Brathwaite" (2007), he tries to apply notions derived from classical musicology – such as form, melody, rhythm, tempo, and harmony – to the analyses of the work of the Caribbean poet. I would argue that the strength of Brathwaite's works resides, however, in its capacity to question every attempt of systematisation, to look forward to an active and committed response by the reader/listener. Brathwaite's music comes out of the interplay of popular and folk musical forms of any kind: African music, blues, reggae, calypso, ska, and most importantly jazz.

The complexity of Brathwaite's writing is given by the writer's constant attempt to convey ideas of possibility and unpredictability, exceeding, in this way, the reduction of his poetry to a nostalgic gesture of return to Africa. As Edwards puts it, Brathwaite's is a "vision of West Indian culture as a polyvocal conversation that must be defined in terms of the process of creolization" (Edwards 2007, p. 8), and as such it strongly connects with Bakhtin's ideas "regarding social discourses as dialogised heteroglossia" (Edwards 2007, p. 8). This explains Brathwaite's choice of jazz – the most dialogical of musical genres – as a fundamental resource and language within the economy of his trilogy. Even though jazz is not a strictly Caribbean art form, it is the one which more closely connects to important aspects of everyday verbal exchange, namely improvisation and turn-taking.

African American jazz is, in short, a fundamental stylistic resource and language within the economy of Brathwaite's trilogy. In an essay entitled "Brathwaite and Jazz", James notes how "Brathwaite brilliantly employs the resources of sound and rhythm to create contrasting musical styles, with a broad range he has identified as one of the characteristics of jazz" (James 1995, p. 65). And indeed, for the poet, jazz does not get stuck to a single statement but "has a series of statements" (Brown 1989, p. 84); jazz is the most dialogical of musical genres as it is inhabited by a multiplicity of styles and voices which project towards other voices and forms of listening.

In the poem "Folkways" from *Rights of Passage*, the poet articulates his verses through the rhythm provided by a boogie-woogie blues, offering in this way a powerfully musical piece in which one can almost hear the sound of the ride (a cymbal) of a jazz drum set:

> Come
> come bugle
> train
> come quick

bugle
train, quick
quick bugle
train, black
boogie-
woogie wheels
fat
boogie-
woogie wagon
rat tat tat…
(Brathwaite 1973, p. 33)

This form of writing – broken, syncopated, absolutely un-linear – is seen by Mervin Morris (1995) as the literary analogue of the jazz technique known as the blue-note (the flattened third or fifth or seventh), a note that makes you hear an adjacent semitone. The transcription of the boogie-woogie in the passage quoted above conveys this idea even though Morris sees a more direct example of the use of the technique in sections of "New World A-Comin" (in *Rights of Passage*) such as the following:

O who now will help
us, help-
less, horse-
less, leader-
less, no
hope, no
hawkins, no
cortez to come.
(Brathwaite 1973, p. 10)

In this passage, the emphasis lies on the idea of absence and deprivation. This kind of technique is largely employed in the first collection of the trilogy, which, as already seen, focuses on a sense of fragmentation.

2. Brathwaite's jazz aesthetics

Brathwaite's involvement with the world of jazz dates back to when he was a student at Barbados' Harrison College: it was a form of enthusiasm which brought him into conflict with the taste of the Island political hierarchy. In the late 1940s, indeed, Brathwaite and some school friends attempted to create a public audience for bebop jazz. First, he started writing jazz reviews in the school paper. Second, they presented a jazz programme on the local radio. The programmes were stopped after two sessions because of the numerous protests; Brathwaite confessed:

> We didn't get beyond two programmes, though. The first one I did; and even as I was on the air people were phoning in, asking what was going on and generally getting Rediffusion frighten. (Brathwaite in Rohleher 1981, p. 5).

In the 1940s, jazz was not certainly considered as a kind of music for respectable people, especially in Barbados. The majority of Barbadians were then enthusiastically loyal to Britain, and jazz was not perceived as a musical form that emulated 'proper' British culture. Nevertheless, Brathwaite's interest in jazz survived the disapprobation of his contemporary cultural elite.

As the poet himself confessed during an interview with Kwame Dawes:

> I had been out of the Caribbean for most of my grown-up years in England and Ghana. So that the only music that I used to listen to was this (not really true – but jazz is what most influences the poetry, certainly of *The Arrivants*). And therefore, whatever jazz was doing meant poetry to me. (Dawes 2001, p. 36)

The poet translated his interest in the genre in the 1968 essay "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" in which – starting from his reading of the novel *Brother Man* (1954) by Roger Mais – he created an alternative Caribbean aesthetics, based on polyphony and polyrhythms that enabled him to experiment with alternatives to Eurocentric culture. In addition to the supremacy of sound, Brathwaite identified three fundamental features for a novel to be considered a jazz novel: first, it had to be rooted in an African presence; second, it had to express protest; and third, it had to manifest the communality of West Indian societies.

Brathwaite focuses on this particular kind of music, because – unlike the ballad, which is a mostly pastoral expression – jazz is an urban folk form that "has wider and more overt connections and correspondences with the increasingly cosmopolitan world in which we live, than the purely West Indian folk forms […]". Most importantly, "jazz in several quarters, is already *seen* to be, or to represent, an alternative to the 'European' tradition" (Brathwaite 1996, p. 107). In considering jazz simultaneously urban, folk, and cosmopolitan, Brathwaite was evidently erasing the division between high and popular culture.

It is important to stress – as Alyn Shipton does in his introduction to *A New History of Jazz* – that jazz has always been capable of generating a powerful response from people of different ethnicities, genders, and social backgrounds:

> Of all the musical forms to emerge during the twentieth century, jazz was by far the most significant. In the early years of the century, it spread first throughout the United States of America, and then quickly to the rest of the world, where its combination of syncopation, unusual pitching, vocal tones, and raw energy touched the hearts and minds of people across the entire spectrum of social and racial backgrounds. Its message was universal, and it stood for something new,

> something revolutionary, something risqué that overturned the old orders of art music and folk music alike. (Shipton 2008, p. 1)

Jazz implies "improvisation" (Bailey 1992, p. ix), interaction, and interplay; in this sense, it is concerned with the redefinition of the self in dialogical terms; it is an art-form which, being strongly rooted in concepts such as enunciation and performance, confers centrality to listening. Very often, in jazz there is no score to read or respond to, what the musician is asked to do is to listen to his/her body and to the body of others in order to read and translate sounds in other sounds, in a horizontal, democratic dimension, which conceives no verticality, no authority. Jazz becomes in this sense a model for a free and freed social interaction, and for the construction of a polyphonic self within this very social dialogue; jazz is a language capable of speaking *across* cultures, it is about stepping "across" lines (Rushdie 2002, p. 407) and borders, it is a language which refuses to "sit still" (Gioia 2001, p. 474) and which very often coincides with the idea of migration itself. As Watson perfectly puts it, "jazz has always been a generous and a malleable music […] it has always reached out beyond race, culture and nation, and beyond doctrine and dogma. Jazz has always been a hybrid music as complex as its history" (Watson 2022, p. 290).

But jazz can also exceed its boundaries; jazz was and still is also able to address and be addressed by other art forms such as painting,[3] cinema,[4] and, of course, literature (Locatelli 2011, pp. 9-10). Moreover, they are all forms of *writing*, modelling systems though which we approach and confer meaning to reality. As Lange affirms in the introductory notes to *Moment's Notice*, a collection on 'jazz' poetry[5] and prose, edited by Lange himself and Nathaniel Mackey:

> The reception jazz has garnered and the influence it has exercised have extended not only far beyond the geographic boundaries of its country of origin but far beyond the boundaries of music itself. Jazz is at the same time a musicians' music […] and a music which, much more than most is more than music. Jazz has become iconic, its own often iconoclastic impulse notwithstanding. […] It is particularly unsurprising that a music which so frequently and characteristically aspires to the condition of speech, reflecting critically, it seems, upon the limits of the sayable, should have provoked and proved of enormous interest to practitioners of the art of the word. (Lange1993, p. i)

[3] The American painter Jackson Pollock listened to jazz for inspiration to become one with his canvas. He submerged himself in the music in order to reach a higher state of mental clarity where he could not be distracted from his unconscious relationship with the paint that dripped from his brush.

[4] There have been a multiplicity of films in the history of Hollywood and European cinema which have focused on jazz as their subject: from Clint Eastwood's *Bird* (1988), which reconstructs the life of Be Bop hero and alto saxophone player Charlie Parker, to Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight* (1986), which features tenor saxophone player Dexter Gordon, to Pupi Avati's *Bix* (1990), which offers a biography of ragtime-era trumpet player Bix Beiderbecke.

[5] On jazz and poetry, see also Martino (2022).

These words allow us to investigate jazz beyond the spatial boundaries of its origins; jazz indeed – as we have seen with Brathwaite – had a major impact in Anglophone literature. In a 2015 interview, Canadian author Michael Ondaatje focuses on his involvement with jazz as a teenager in London – when he used to dance in jazz clubs thrice a week – and affirms:

> The rhythms of music in some ways has [*sic*] been the biggest influence on my writing. It's not Wordsworth, it's Ray Charles. […] When I'm writing the pace of a paragraph or a long, long sentence that takes over a page is closer to music than any other thing I know. (Louisiana Channel 2015, 00:28-01:13)

Brathwaite – who knew about the 1950s London jazz scene – importantly defines jazz in contrast with the earlier blues of slave culture. Jazz, in the poet's view, is the sound of resistance:

> Jazz […] is not 'slave' music at all. It is the emancipated Negro's music: hence the brash brass colouring, the bravado, its parade of syncopation, its emphasis on improvisations, its swing. It is the music of the freed man who having left the countryside of his shamed and bitter origins, has moved into the complex, high-life town. (Brathwaite 1996, pp. 268-269)

In this sense, for Brathwaite jazz represents the perfect expression for "the rootless, 'cultureless' truly ex-patriate Negro" (Brathwaite 1996, p. 269). Jazz has been "from the beginning a cry from the heart of the hurt man, the lonely one" (Brathwaite 1996, p. 269). We hear this in the sound of "the saxophone and of the trumpet" (Brathwaite 1996, p. 269) of many performers, from John Coltrane to Don Cherry. But the affirmation of such a genre does not come from the individual voice but from the ensemble, the merging of the various instruments. This is particularly relevant in free jazz ensembles such as the Liberation Music Orchestra by double bass player and activist Charlie Haden.

In an interview which took place in Kingston in 2008, the poet answered to a question concerning the specificity of his choice in these terms:

> It just happens to be jazz; but I was seeking for a musical form which allowed me to hear the speaking voice, which allowed me to see the individual within the community, and which allowed me free improvisation within a tradition and jazz does it. (Martino 2009, p. 121)

Brathwaite's poetry concentrates on specific aspects of jazz. It has the accessibility of folk music – it has indeed popular roots – and expresses experiences of common life in their dissonance, fragmentation, and syncopation. Jazz – with its focus on *how*, on the way something is said more than on what is said – is not content so much as style, as it adapts and transforms melodies and musical forms. It can be considered as a natural development of the oral tradition, for it is fundamentally dependent on

performance: its experience is not created in the transcriptions on scores but, as we have seen, in the very moment of playing, in the here and now. For this reason, jazz is continuously creative, it leaves room to improvisation but makes sense only within the ensemble, within the communal sensibility. In choosing jazz, Brathwaite chooses a cultural expression that represents a precise modern black experience in its movement from slavery to freedom, and from countryside to metropolis.

According to Francis (2007), two different kinds of dissonance are at work in jazz: a dissonance of form, characterised by an absence of harmony and playing the wrong note, and a dissonance of content, corresponding to a story told that is discordant with the prevailing, mainstream representation. For instance, a cruel or sad story accompanied by a melodic rather than a disconsolate blues is quite unsettling. Armstrong was one of the major representatives of this last form of dissonance. His manipulation of classical forms and instruments had a profound impact on Brathwaite. Armstrong was indeed a skilled and technical musician, but he did not apply his technique in a traditional Western way. Armstrong's attitude provided Brathwaite with the awareness that Western models could be dispensed with. The trumpeter's impact clearly manifested itself in Brathwaite's collection of poetry *Black + Blues* (1976). It is an ode to the musician. It takes its title from Armstrong's remake of Fats Waller's "Black and Blue". The collection also includes a poem entitled "Trane", which is a tribute to one of the most important musical voices in jazz history, i.e. tenor and soprano saxophone player John Coltrane, author of the iconic jazz album *A Love Supreme* (1965):

> Propped against the crowded bar
> he pours into the curved and silver horn
> his old unhappy longing for a home
>
> […] but no stars blazed across the sky when he was born
> no wise men found his hovel . this crowded bar
> where dancers twist and turn
>
> holds all the fame and recognition he will ever earn
> on earth or heaven. he leans against the bar
> and pours his old unhappy longing in the saxophone.
> (Brathwaite 1976, p. 14)

The poem witnesses Brathwaite's capacity of appreciating jazz in its multiple – and even in the most dissonant and complex – forms. His interest also addressed the later Coltrane, the one concerned with spirituality and free forms, and free jazz players such as Albert Ayler, to whom he dedicated a poem entitled "Clock".

I suggest that jazz may be considered a model for Caribbean culture, an instrument through which it is possible to redefine and reshape cultural

assumptions imposed by Europe, and a free performative language that creates a fundamental sense of community. Creativity in the Caribbean is closely related to music. When asked to define the relationship between poetry and music in an interview, Brathwaite answered:

> Poetry is music, as far as I'm concerned. It is another form of music. It is oral, verbal, vocal music. That's my simple answer to that. I can't say more than that. Poetry is a form of music, a form of music, a form of music. (Martino 2009, p. 119)

Interestingly, the very iteration of the words during the interview aimed at conveying the very idea of music which is present in any verbal enunciation.

According to Brathwaite, poetry means speaking to the community that is playing, making music *with* the community; it is based on the relationship between the centre and the periphery, the call and the response. Brathwaite's concern for concepts such as that of community, collectivity, and people leads him in the early 1980s to write a seminal essay entitled *History of the Voice. The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry.* Here Brathwaite makes reference to Eliot, writing that "what T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone" (Brathwaite 1984, p. 30). T.S. Eliot exerted an important influence on Brathwaite – especially the Eliot inspired by jazz (as in the *The Waste Land*) and by ways of saying that were far from Standard English. In the above-mentioned essay, Brathwaite defines his idea of national, or "nation", language as follows:

> [N]ation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sounds explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree. (Brathwaite 1984, p. 13)

This is one of Brathwaite's most referred to formulations in the field of postcolonial studies to explain the difference between *English* (Standard English) and *englishes*, i.e. the multiplicity of languages emerged as a response to the language of the coloniser to express an everyday world of differences, dissonances, and experiences which Standard English cannot express.

In 1986, Brathwaite published a collection entitled *Jah Music* in which he expanded some ideas presented in *Black+Blues* (1976), where his interest in Caribbean folk culture had brought him to look at reggae, besides jazz, as a source of inspiration. In short, improvisation enabled him to discover other ways of representing dissonance, exploring local music patterns of calypso, reggae, and Caribbean folk music:

> As I get to know more about the Caribbean the emphasis shifts from jazz to the Caribbean, to calypso, to reggae, to our folk music, […] so that it appears to be a moving away from jazz, as it is, in one sense, and an effort to explore more fully the nature, the musical patterns, of the local scenes. (Brathwaite in Mackey 1995, p. 29)

This also explains why Brathwaite has become a point of reference for Dub poets such as Mikey Smith and Linton Kwesi Johnson, whose poetry is defined by a constant effort to speak for and give voice to subaltern communities.

In a 2008 interview, Brathwaite pointed to the importance of relationships; all art, he insisted, is a way "to deepen a relationship, to repair a relationship, to celebrate a relationship, to mourn a relationship" (Brathwaite in Martino 2009, p. 122). The point for Brathwaite is that we should try to be *in tune* with the other, and yet

> [t]he problem is that the tunes have become so discordant that there is a great challenge of the spirit and of the arts to create a new harmony. Because I don't think we can return to the original plain chant, the original simple harmonics. We have gone into a-chronology and disharmony. But still we are trying to find a new super-harmony which will once more reunite, reconnect the sensibilities. […] As things become more dissonant the state of society becomes more important and society begins to impinge upon the freedom of expression of the arts. So that what happens now in the 21st century is that the responsibility of the artist, and the attention and the energy of the arts to me is tending towards the resolution of the problems of society. (Brathwaite in Martino 2009, pp. 122-123)

It is possible to conclude by stressing how Brathwaite, who died on 4 February 2020, left us an extremely precious legacy, i.e. a jazz aesthetic that stands as a resistant and subversive space and as a perspective to rethink the idea of poetry and our being in a community. His aesthetic provides a system of languages that voice the modernist sense of alienation, chaos, disillusionment, and hope that characterises not only African American or West Indian literature but all subaltern cultures in the world. Such an approach blurs national borders, invoking a communal cultural/literary/musical experience of resistance.

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SANCTUARY OF SLAVERY
Relocating Race Through Sound in an Alpine Town

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Abstract – *Sanctuary of Slavery* is a performance that took place in Schlanders, in the heart of the South Tyrolean Vinschgau Valley,[1] in September 2018. It showcased the work of musicians and artists of African origin as well as asylum seekers and refugees residing in the region. Besides bringing to central areas of the alpine town individuals who had been marginalised in refugee houses, the performance successfully created, albeit temporarily, what human geographer Heather Merrill describes as 'Black spaces'. Musical sounds and singing voices – resonating in the library, the *Musikpavillon*, and the main streets of Schlanders – relocated the discussion about race to its historical context. Through an ethnographic account and a focus on the role of sound in reshaping meaning, the article explores how the social divide based on race and the institutional separation based on the category of 'linguistic groups' interact with work exploitation and the Italian migration policies.

Keywords: race; soundscape; singing voices; African diaspora; Black spaces.

From these enemies, on the borderline
Who'll be the next to fire
Forty-one shots by Diallo's side?
(W. Jean "Diallo", 2000).

1. Introduction

Standing in front of a small van while drinking water with ginger, Nana, a rapper and producer from Ghana, Assan, a Senegalese percussionist, and myself, an ethnomusicologist from Southern Italy, were resting after playing some music together. It was nearly the end of August, but the summer temperatures were still high, even more so inside Nana's small van that served both as lodging and recording studio. It was parked in the garden of an old hotel, which – like other similar buildings across Italy – had been

[1] South Tyrol (Südtirol in German, Alto Adige in Italian) is a bilingual region in which places are usually identified by names in the two languages (as for example in the city of Bozen/Bolzano). In this article, for the sake of clarity, only German names have been used.

transformed into a temporary camp for asylum seekers. As the conversation shifted to our musical preferences, we identified a point of convergence within our different experiences: "Diallo", a piece from Haitian musician and producer Wyclef Jean.[2]

Nana introduced the topic: "I was teaching in a school when I was still in Ghana, and at the same time I was getting into music. I remember going to school every day, I was paying no attention to people around me, all I had was this song in my mind and my headphones. Getting crazy when it moves from reggae to afrobeat. *Diallo, Diallo, tuye' Diallo*".

"I remember listening to that song in Chicago one specific evening" – I replied – "That day I attended a community event in the South Side, where everyone was talking about the verdict of the trial for the killing of Travyon Martin that had been announced the day before. Once I was back home, I felt well because the event had been energising, but I was depressed for the verdict, so I turned to this song".

"Diallo?" – Assan added – "This might be a Senegalese name. He might be a relative of mine".

The conversation took place during the rehearsals of a performative production that was going to be held four weeks later in a small town in South Tyrol. I use it as an anecdote to highlight the focal point of this article: the existence of Black spaces within an Italian alpine region close to the Austrian border, and the role of music in creating and defining these spaces. The anecdote brings to the forefront another important facet of both the performance and this article: the musical and performative response to violence and discrimination against black bodies. The song "Diallo", a combination of reggae, afrobeat, and recordings of a spoken voice that contextualises the lyrics, articulates a musical critique of the circumstances in which Amadou Diallo, a Liberian citizen based in New York, was killed by 41 shots fired by four policemen (Beth 2009; Diallo, Wolff 2004).

In her analysis of the Italian context, human geographer Heather Merrill affirms that "African and other refugees and migrants are scurried out of sight to the spatial peripheries of towns and cities […] These are black spaces of social control, and moreover, black spaces of social death" (Merrill 2018, p. 59). In her research, Merrill came also across what she defines as Black spaces, "with a capital *B*, where they [first and second generation African Italian subjects] exercise some degree of control over their individual lives and those of their families, knowledge of self and one's social position, and where they build communities that crisscross established ethnic, racial, and sometimes class divisions" (Merrill 2018, pp. 56-57).

[2] Rebecca Dirksen (2020) offers a rich analysis of the figure of Wyclef Jean in relation to his attempt to run for the Haitian presidency in 2010.

In this paper, I would like to focus on a specific case study in which I participated both as co-curator and researcher: *Sanctuary of Slavery*, the performative event I curated together with Cincinnati-based vocalist and educator Napoleon Maddox for which Nana, Assan, and I were practicing. It evolved from a piece tailored for a local festival into an attempt to create Black spaces among asylum seekers in South Tyrol.

Choreographer and community organiser Rodney Diverlus defines artivism as "an educational, creative, choreographic, movement-building, performance, and organizing tool" (Diverlus 2016, p. 189). Following his theorisation, we designed *Sanctuary of Slavery* as an artivist tool encompassing these six elements. Besides incorporating *Twice the First Time*, a multimedia production about the true story of two conjoined sisters born in slavery in North Carolina[3] created and performed by Maddox that toured Europe and the United States in 2017, the festival commissioned an additional performance with the aim of contextualising Maddox's show in the area. As soon as conversations about the project started, Maddox and I agreed on a first premise: we did not want to recreate unbalanced power relations through musical representation (Birenbaum Quintero 2019). We were certain we did not want to display the artists as 'migrants' and represent blackness in Italy in any specific way, but rather expose the ways in which asylum seekers of African origins were being represented in the public arena.

More specifically, we wanted to achieve three main objectives: challenge a stereotypical representation of African migrants making music for a white European audience; give space to the voice of the asylum seekers involved in the project; create the condition to generate a sense of community among asylum seekers, refugees, and locals interested in musical expressions and solidarity. The last objective points directly to Merrill's idea of Black spaces. Moreover, Millie-Christine McCoy's story, on which *Twice the First Time* is based, allowed us to elaborate on the concept of slavery, which became both a metaphor for the condition in which many asylum seekers were forced to operate and a conceptual critical lens through which the audience could reshape their understanding of the presence of African Italian individuals and communities in South Tyrolean society.[4]

[3] Conjoined sisters Millie-Christine McCoy were born in slavery in North Carolina in 1851. Napoleon Maddox, the son of a niece of one of Millie-Christine's sisters, put together their story by collecting his family's memories and consulting archival documentation. In *Twice the First Time*, he recounts how they were forced to be part of circuses and freak shows since an early age. They were later kidnapped and brought to the United Kingdom, where they learnt to dance, sing, and write. Their creativity brought them success, and they were later able to return to their village in North Carolina and buy the land where they were born. For further details on their lives, see Martell (1999).

[4] Nicole Stuckey (2017) presents an interesting analysis of how linguistic and cultural segregation in South Tyrol affects the local hip hop scene.

Despite our intentions and attempts to focus more on the process than on the event, some difficulties emerged along the way. Among the various issues that we had to face, two were particularly problematic. We were aware that a performance, as powerful as it might be, could not establish permanent changes, but how could we communicate that to the participants without undermining their enthusiasm and motivation? The second issue was related to labour. We wanted to create a discussion around the perception of blackness and the issue of black labour in South Tyrol, but at the same time the artists who wanted to participate in the project had to take time off their jobs. These two questions would reverberate in the preparation of the event and in the performance itself.

2. The event and the festival

The project was hosted by Transart, a renowned festival of contemporary culture that takes place every year in September with the main goal of bringing to South Tyrol new tendencies in the field of music as well as visual and audiovisual arts. It is a much-anticipated event in the wealthy bilingual province as collectors and festival goers alike enjoy high-profile contemporary art and music as if they were in bigger cities like Berlin or London. The festival director is resolute in connecting such new tendencies with the local scenario, bringing adventuresome performances to the small villages and the mountain landscapes the region is famous for.

Within this framework, the director contacted me to curate an event for the 2018 edition with Napoleon Maddox's *Twice the First Time* as its centre and a specific connection with the African residents of the area. Since I moved there some two years before the event, I had been in touch with several asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants from different African countries who were adopting musical expressions to understand their social position and elaborate personal narratives. The project was going to rely on this experience. Schlanders was chosen by the production as the location for the performance. It is a town of about 6,000 inhabitants – strategically positioned in the middle of the famous Vinschgau Valley, halfway from Meran and the Swiss and Austrian border – which serves as the relatively bigger centre in a network of smaller villages. We asked the festival production to bring the event to Schlanders' main streets and most frequented locations in order to question issues of representation and re-centre the life of individuals who had been so often marginalised.

The relative freedom granted by the festival organisers allowed us to build our own strategy to achieve the aforementioned goals. Even though Napoleon was in the United States, we decided to work as co-curators and evaluate together every step of the process. We chose to design a structure

that could incorporate free expressions from the participants, with limited or no control from our part. However, we still wanted to provide the audience with the appropriate tools to understand the critical approach of the project. Therefore, we divided the performance into three sections gravitating around the following concepts: 'Reflections', 'Intersections', 'Redemptions'. Next, we located the right space for each section. 'Reflections', a first section intended as an introductory statement, would be set in the town's 17th-century castle, where institutional offices and the local library were located at the time. It looked like a suitable scenario for solo and a cappella singing. In addition, the small cloister of the castle could be used for different sound installations exploring the intersections of blackness, labour, and slavery. Hence, the cloister looked like the right place to start the conversation: "People need to see us black people" – stated David Odia,[5] who was going to open the event with his poetry, during some rehearsals. The 'Reflections' opening was therefore specifically designed to create the conditions – in the context of Schlanders – for the unfolding of a different perspective on blackness and asylum seekers.

The second section was both more physical and more conceptual. After leaving the castle, a march would bring the audience to the second station, the *Musikpavillon*. This second section was meant to create 'intersections' among people as the audience was going to be invited to march, sing, and play some percussion instruments. It was also conceived as an intersection of meanings as the bandstand, the place where South Tyrolean traditional brass band usually perform, would be transformed into a different kind of setting. A big dark curtain with the phrase "Sanctuary of Slavery" would be hanging at the centre of the stage. Beneath the curtain, a narrow tunnel at the end of which a rapper would be singing. Each visitor coming from the joyful march would then go on stage, walk beneath the curtain, meet the singing rapper face to face, and walk by a table with some chocolate products on it. The march would then start again and continue through the main streets of Schlanders, where several rappers would perform while marching among groups of locals and tourists busy with their shopping activities. The parade would then go back to the library lawn for the final set of 'redemptions' with a collective singing moment, which would then be repeated before Maddox's performance about Millie-Christine McCoy's victorious journey, for which the production had chosen a less central location.

[5] For the artists who actively participated in the project, I use the name they provided in the official programme, without any additional information like, for example, their country of origin or place of residence. This is not the case for Nana and Assan, who are well-established performers in the musical scene of the provinces of Trento and Bozen.

The path on which Napoleon and I wanted to embark to get African Italians involved in the project had to focus on the conditions that enabled and generated their movement. Slavery as a historical condition and a century-long trade that affected many of the countries the asylum seekers came from was a theme that could provide a different typology of alliance between the audience and the performers.

In addition, the reference to the term *sanctuary* both underlined the central role of Millie-Christine McCoy's narrative and allowed us as curators to articulate a critique against the ways in which the system of hospitality, although depicted as a charitable act, was designed to provide widely available workforce, whose rights were profoundly undermined by the threat of their asylum application.

By using slavery, we were also drawing from the experiences Napoleon and I built in Chicago. During a symposium organised at the Center for Black Music Research in 2014, we had the chance to work on the sonic memory of slavery and the ways in which recollecting stories of slavery through sounds and voices opens up possibilities to understand emotional connections and historical entanglements (Chiriacò 2018). Sounds and voices were therefore identified as our artivist tools, while slavery as a human condition and systematic exploitation was the main theme.

The structure here described was supposed to work as a frame for artists and participants to express their own viewpoints. Therefore, once the design was completed and approved, I continued to visit South Tyrolean refugee houses[6] in order to involve artists and participants. I will describe how my visits both clarified and challenged the premises of the project, but I will first briefly turn to the representation of migrants in Italy for a better understanding of the conditions in which the project developed.

3. Representing race in contemporary Italy

Sociological analysis, ethnographies, and oral histories dealing with migration in contemporary Italy have mainly focused on journeys (Ciabarri 2013) and borders (Aime 2020). In other words, the presence of migrants, or even the whole discourse regarding the existence of migration, has been spatialised. It has been conceived in form of space, either considering the 'invasion' of southern Europe (Ciabarri 2020) or the creation of (relatively safe) symbolic spaces such as the Black Mediterranean (Di Maio 2015;

[6] *Fluchtlingshäuser* [refugee houses] is the common name for houses in South Tyrol that usually host about 25-30 asylum seekers, who live in small apartments or in dormitory-style rooms. I use the word *house* or *refugee house* to refer to this kind of accommodation. Bigger spaces will be referred to as *camps*.

Hawthorne 2022; Proglio 2018) or the Black spaces. While considering the theoretical binary classification of Black/black spaces as particularly useful in this context, I argue that the spatialisation of migration discourse takes us away from subjectivities and history. Similarly, Ida Danewid (2017) warns us that approaches based on grief and empathy, despite encouraging humanity, obnubilate the historical condition that enabled – as well as generated – such movements of people. What Danewid suggests is that the 'safe space' European liberals want to provide migrants with tends to safeguard a European imagination rather than a communal understanding. As underlined in Camilla Hawthorne's book (2022), the Italian context is additionally complicated by the absence of a common language to identify, for example, Italians with an African origin and people who are born and raised in an African country but happen to live in Italy. The political demonstrations and flash mobs organised by networks such as Rete 2G or #ItalianiSenzaCittadinanza, which Hawthorne thoroughly describes, emphasise the focus on spaces but at the same time reveal that – for asylum seekers – the opportunities to obtain a space to convey social messages are extremely limited.

Dal Lago (1999) postulates that migrants are seen as non-humans by the Italian media. Inspired by his work, many cultural studies and postcolonial studies scholars challenge the representations of race and the lack of reflection, within public discourse, on the colonial past and its heritage. Some of these scholars focus on the body of immigrants as a 'battleground' against invisibility, especially when it is mediatised through the work of journalists, photographers, or video artists. Simona Wright (2018) argues that it is even in the absence of the immigrants' bodies, as in Dagmawi Yimer's poignant work *Asmat/Names*, that the battle against invisibility is fought. A reflection on colonialism and its relations to contemporary migration (Ponzanesi, Colpani 2016) leads to a consideration about personal narratives coming both from travellers along the Mediterranean route and their rescuers (Budge 2018). As a middle point between a focus on the bodies of migrants and a focus on personal narratives, *Sanctuary of Slavery* was oriented towards the role of human voices and their political interrelations (Cavarero 2003). The ability of the voice to provide both an orienting tool in an unknown space (Chiriacò 2018) and a tool for building meaningful relationships with a strong political potential became a crucial part of the investigation at the foundation of the project.

As an ethnomusicologist, I constantly reflect on how sound defines the perception of space; therefore, I wished to bring sound into the spatialisation of (the discourse around) migration in order to pay attention to personal and collective narratives. Hence, the main point of *Sanctuary of Slavery* was to define not only a space in which the migrants' voices could be heard but also

a space in which the main orientation – for an audience immersed in a performance across the streets of Schlanders – was the singing voice. To inhabit such a space meant to accept a change in soundmarks through the collective engagement led by artists who at the time of the performance were also asylum seekers. *Soundmark* is the term proposed by pioneer soundscape scholar Raymond Murray Schafer (1994) to identify a 'community sound' with distinctive characteristics. Sound studies has developed Schafer's idea of soundmarks by pinpointing that communities are constantly involved in actively reshaping meaning through sounds. As in the New Orleans jazz funeral processions analysed by Matt Sakakeeny (2010), an exploration of soundscapes entails that "making sound, listening to sound, and discussing sound are meaningful activities that underscore the significance of sound less as a point of consensus than of negotiation" (Sakakeeny 2010, p. 3). This was also the kind of negotiation through sounds – between local communities and African asylum seekers – that we wanted for *Sanctuary of Slavery*.

The use of widely known African American musical styles (rap, spirituals, gospel, etc.) in the wider context of the African diaspora allowed for a specific content through which the use of voice as a tool to build communities could be even more effective. By tapping into shared musical memories, we affirmed the possibility to engage the audience with a more complex discourse about the conditions of asylum seekers in South Tyrol and the several African countries they were from, while at the same time appreciating their performances.

4. The case of South Tyrol

The condition of asylum seekers in 2018 Italy was particularly challenging. The political election that took place in the spring that year was characterised by a strong campaign by the ex-secessionist turned sovereigntist right-wing party Lega and its leader Matteo Salvini, who invariably used the landing of 'migrants' on the Italian coasts to depict a threat on which he built his campaign. A month before the vote, an individual who had also been a candidate for the same party in a previous election, took to the streets of Macerata and shot his handgun several times towards people of African descent. This episode notwithstanding, Salvini's Lega ended up being the first party of the right-wing coalition and formed a government with the populist Five Star Movement. As Home Secretary, Salvini issued a security decree which severely restrained the asylum seekers' conditions by making it more complex for them to obtain the refugee status and by defunding any extra-activities aiming at providing them with appropriate tools.

As an autonomous province with a majority of inhabitants speaking a local variety of German, South Tyrol is a slightly different context for asylum

seekers and migrants in general. Anthropologist Dorothy Zinn has studied migration within South Tyrolean society through the lens of its educational system (Zinn 2018). Although she focuses on a period pre-dating the context of the so-called 'migration crisis', her analysis of the migrant as metaphor is illuminating for the understanding of the exceptionality of South Tyrol. Zinn considers migrants as *metaphors* as their presence tends to re-establish the pre-eminence of the ubiquitous, although often not explicit, separation along the ethno-linguistic line between 'Germans' and 'Italians'. The social changes brought by the movement of people have not challenged such 'hidden frontier' – to use the formula developed in John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf's classic anthropological study (1999). On the contrary, Zinn posits that "the [social] changes did not represent so much the erasure of the hidden frontier, as its transmogrification and upgrade into a *Hidden Frontier 2.0*." (Zinn 2018, p. 14). The hidden frontier continuously shapes the lives of migrants who, following the Dublin Regulation, become part of the Italian system but inhabit an environment in which speaking German represents a strategic advantage. Despite not being at the centre of the *Sanctuary of Slavery* project, for the African asylum seekers I worked with the hidden frontier meant that their workforce status was even more precarious. Besides the social divide between migrants and Europeans, they experienced the linguistic distance between German, which could be useful to obtain a better job position, and Italian, which is needed to submit an asylum application to the Italian courts, which often requires a convincing narrative for the asylum commission.[7]

5. Locating race through sounds and music

The first encounter with the local community of musicians who are also asylum seekers or refugees took place a year and a half before the event. I was teaching a course in ethnomusicology at the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano which gave me the opportunity to organise a workshop with Napoleon Maddox. The workshop, which was planned for students but also open to the public, became a moment for local rappers to get together. That day, I learnt that although they lived in different 'houses', many asylum seekers were involved in music making, especially hip hop, as an expressive form that enabled them to maintain supportive social and artistic ties with their countries of origin and create connections with their new context. In so

[7] Sorgoni (2015) analyses some narratives presented to the commission, which is entitled to decide about the asylum seekers' request, and demonstrates that, rather than tell the true story of the person submitting the request, most of them are tailored to satisfy the expectations of the commissioners.

doing, these artists enabled a "process of counter-racialization *through* rap music and slam poetry" (Frisina, Kyeremeh 2022, p. 4). In addition, for them music functioned as a key tool for social labour. For that reason, many of them saw a seminar at the local university with an African American artist as an opportunity that could not be missed. As they explained in further conversations, what they were looking for was a connection with an American representative of the music they loved and a local acknowledgement of the value of the music they were creating. They transformed an academic seminar into a Black space, paving the way to the Transart Festival project. As a consequence of the workshop, I built a connection with one of the houses with the specific objective of observing how their musical interests, practices, and listening habits were shaping their experience (Chiriacò 2017). There, I met two persons who would be fundamental in the creation of *Sanctuary of Slavery*: Karim Rossi Rusdo and Favour Godstime.

Karim immediately stood out when Badara Seck visited the house the evening before one of his concerts in the area. The Senegalese musician and composer, who has been active in Italy for more than 30 years, has collaborated with some extremely popular musicians and artists and gained a vast experience in cooperating with musicians and artists of different origins and in creating works of art with people with migratory background (Chiriacò 2016; Lombardi-Diop 2009). As soon as he arrived, Badara asked the people in the house: "Does any of you play some instruments or sing?" Karim's response was immediate: "I talk". That short exchange developed into a musical piece in which Badara sang a melody and Karim recounted his story.[8] The audiovisual documentation of that performance inspired the young man to create "Karim's Dream" with the help of local artists, a new videoclip where he looks directly into the camera within the setting of a small theatre while the audio track of the musical performance with Badara's voice and his own narrative is playing.[9] Not only did Karim promote the video on local televisions and online channels but also further developed his own 'signature' – "I talk" – and used it for his own podcast, *Radio Africa Bolzano*. In the show, he employed two smartphones: as one was playing songs from YouTube, the other was used to record voice messages. The ingenious podcast was later sent to his contacts both in Italy and Ivory Coast. After being invited to bring his craft to *Sanctuary of Slavery* in the form he preferred, Karim decided to use his radio platform to broadcast the event via WhatsApp and to produce some interviews about it and share them via the

[8] For a video of the musical piece, see Afrovocality (2018).
[9] For a video of the performance, see Rossi Rusdo (2019).

same channel. Furthermore, he chose to screen his video before the *Twice the First Time* performance.

The house Badara Seck visited was also the place where Favour used to live. After I was introduced to her and found out she was interested in singing, we regularly met to sing together. We then realised that she was interested in composing her own songs rather than developing vocal skills, so we engaged in composition together. At first, she wished to write love songs, but short afterwards she turned to gospel. We prepared together a song titled "God, You Are My Saviour", which she sang with Badara Seck's band during his show. Favour played a major role in the *Sanctuary of Slavery* performance as well since hers was the first singing voice to be heard. She was also the main energy catalyser during the march, which she led pulling her daughter's stroller.

My previous experience with Karim and Favour's refugee house led me to think that other houses would have similar responses during the preparation of *Sanctuary of Slavery*, but I was proved otherwise. While preparing the performance, I visited or tried to make contacts with several other houses with little or no success. A social worker in Mals – a village that had been in the news for its community's prompt reaction and widespread voluntary help during the 2015-2016 'refugees welcome' phase – explained to me per e-mail that nobody in Mals could participate in the project because they were either working or looking for a job. Her e-mail underlined two aspects that were ubiquitous in my conversations with musicians, refugees, and social workers at the time of the preparation of the festival performance: the question of labour and the atmosphere after the 'refugees welcome' phase.

The social worker in Mals was not alone in her reasoning as the average response when I visited the refugee houses was that the focus was on 'work' (either actual work or the search of it) rather than on getting involved in artistic projects. Bluntly said, every white person I spoke with, no matter the goodness of their intentions, stated: "If you are black, you need to have a job". In addition to that, the houses – probably as a reaction to the new political climate – started to apply more strict regulations about returning at a certain time in the evening, leaving the house overnight, sleeping over, visits, etc. By visiting and frequenting the houses, it was clear that their written and unwritten regulations limited the freedom of movement and left the complete workload of what David Graeber calls "interpretive labor" (Graeber 2009, p. 516), i.e. the labour needed to understand social rules and find a way to live with them, on the asylum seekers' shoulders. As a response to this approach, I was constantly reminded of what David Odia said: "People need to see us black people".

The Mals social worker's e-mail suggested another theme, i.e. the social environment in which our event was going to take place and the differences between the context of the 'refugees-welcome' response and the atmosphere of the summer 2018. As we were getting ready for the festival, Salvini was particularly active in imposing an immigration invasion rhetoric that increasingly justified – among people and communities across Italy – the need for explicit violence aimed at 'sending them back home'. In Schlanders, I encountered significant frustration for this new atmosphere among the activists and musicians I had made connections with to establish alliances for the event. Activist and video maker Mara Stirner voiced that frustration while explaining to me that "c'è un'atmosfera pesante, la senti anche nei bar, parlando con la gente" [the air around is thick, you can feel it walking into a bar, talking to people].

As I started to feel the thick air myself, notwithstanding the commitment of the artists and activists I encountered along the way, some concerns started to grow. I was not sure that I could keep the different pieces within a coherent performance, a preoccupation that I later realised was at odds with the initial plan of creating an open environment. On a more practical level, a sense of frustration hindered the preparation as planning rehearsals was often very hard. Despite their interests and explicit commitments, it was even difficult to receive a definitive confirmation from the artists involved in the final performance as their entire life was dependent on the response from the asylum commission and the house managers and their coordinators. When I shared my frustration with Napoleon, he was very clear in describing how he conceived the performance: "We should work as community organisers and activists do. They aim at building up the energy in the days that precede the final event".

6. Building up the energy

Napoleon was pushing me to enhance our motivation as participants and as a group of artists rather than give in to the typical worries of an event organiser. He was inviting me to act as an artivist who "must challenge, confront, and resist this otherwise inescapable fate of torture, injustice, and inhumanity" (Asante 2008, p. 203). My response to his suggestion was twofold: a musical one and a curatorial one. On the one hand, I made some musical choices, which I had avoided until that moment, regarding a few elements I wished to incorporate into the performance. I chose to bring into the collective moments small excerpts selected from African American texts like the refrain and the harmonic structure of the song "No Man Stop" by Jamaican artist Brushy One String (Blotta 2013) and the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" – the latter was suggested by Napoleon. The use of these

excerpts was central in the developing of a black connection across the streets of Schlanders. Moreover, I included bass sounds inspired by basic beatboxing techniques and Brushy One String's distinctive style.

The curatorial response was to look for different environments from the refugee houses I had frequented until that time. This choice brought me to the Ex-Alimarket refugee camp in the industrial district of Bozen. The pattern I found there was different from the one in the refugee houses as social workers were trying to connect with the asylum seekers on a more personal level, besides dealing with the difficult task of helping them go through legal tasks and job applications. Moreover, the camp was an exception to the local policy of hospitality as it was a bigger place with several dozens of (only male) asylum seekers from several countries. This resulted in a different dynamic in terms of power relations as they could create ingroups and alliances, and consequently pay less attention to the directions provided by the house authorities.

That it was a different venue could also be experienced through sound. Its big open space presented a sonosphere in which afro-beat, spiritual songs from Southern Asia, and North African hip hop coexisted with different musical selections coming out from various speakers – each owned by an individual or a small group – and mixing into the air. According to Sakakeeny (2010), the copresence of different sounds can be seen as a form of negotiation for a peaceful coexistence rather than for consensus. Furthermore, the sonosphere was more welcoming than in the other smaller houses, where headphones had to be nearly always used and therefore the individual musical choices were silenced.

The conversation with Napoleon induced me to pay a visit to Nana Motobi in his studio. At the time I first met him, he had been active as a rapper in Italy for six years and was leading the African hip hop scene in Trento, the closest Italian-speaking city to Bozen. He mainly sings in Italian, Pidgin, and English. Like Karima 2G, whose work has been analysed by Annarita Taronna (2016), the 'black English' he uses allows him to convey an effective mixture of humour and political messages. Besides being a rapper, Nana had already worked as a mediator and cooperated with several cultural associations. He had accumulated a number of experiences that he used in his own projects, most notably RapConto, in which he taught several young people the use of rap and hip hop as a personal expression – the neologism *rapconto* ['storapping'] from 'racconto', the Italian word for 'storytelling', is already a marker of Nana's creativity and drive. Not only did he teach young people but also supported them in recording their own songs and in getting, organising, and promoting their own concerts.

Through his work, experiences, and ability to negotiate, Nana had achieved an exceptional position. Although he arrived in Italy from Ghana in

his twenties, in institutional settings he was perceived as someone who could enjoy full Italian citizenship even though he was not a citizen yet. He did not have to fight for citizenship the way the second generation analysed by Hawthorne (2022) did, and he also did not have to struggle for recognition as an asylum seeker. Nana was doubtless using his position and creativity to build a scene from which he could also beneficiate, but the goal of helping people with a similar origin and spreading knowledge about the injustices and discriminations they must suffer is prominent in his work. At that time, he was also studying to become a professional producer, and it is in this role that I contacted him.

I first invited Nana to create his own sound installation for the 'Redemption' section of the performance. The idea was welcomed by the energetic musician, who also suggested we include his RapConto initiative, ask Assan to lead the singing march, and involve young rappers of African descent based in Trento like Wasky and Lif. Moreover, Nana recommended the use of what he calls 'StreetRap tactics'. He had already experienced the temporary occupation of public spaces with a transportable speaker and a couple of microphones so that rappers – mostly coming from his workshops – could participate in the impromptu performance. He became the natural leader of the *Sanctuary of Slavery* sections that included the use of rap: 'Intersections' and 'Redemptions'.

7. The final performance

Two days before the performance in Schlanders, we were finally able to have a meeting at the Ex-Alimarket camp with Napoleon and all the artists, a group of people who were already eager to participate in the workshop activities and in the final event. After we sang together, Napoleon and the participants talked about the meaning the event could have for each of them, and then he directed them in two collective improvisations with musical excerpts from Brushy One String and the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine". The conversations that followed highlighted the spiritual and emotional value attributed to that moment. Ethnomusicologist Fulvia Caruso has noted that asylum seekers in the city of Cremona have difficulties in creating social bonds among themselves. In the workshops and the rehearsal of the two ensembles she has worked with, music elicits a "progressive switch from a passive situation to one based on social action" (Caruso 2018, p. 279). Her words precisely describe the atmosphere we were finally able to create at the dawn of the event.

On September 21, 2018, the date of the performance, we met in Bozen. The festival production had arranged a bus to drive us from Bozen, where all the artists converged, to Schlanders. We were surprised to see 37 artists on

the bus – five more were waiting in Schlanders. Before leaving, we realised that one of them, who had been particularly involved during the meetings and the rehearsal, was not present because a few days before the event he had been abruptly transferred to a different house in another village and had not been authorised to join us.

After a brief general rehearsal, the event began at 6pm. The first part in the cloister went perfectly well, with the voices provided by pre-recorded audio installations (among them, an original piece by Nana) and David's and Favour's fundamental contributions – the latter was particularly appreciated by the audience and critics alike (Groschup 2018). The march came after this first part, with Assan, the percussionist, leading it. The energy that came out was totally different from what we experienced the previous days. We had worked on singing formulas that in the end were totally dismissed and replaced by rhythms provided by Assan and improvised chants led by Favour. Songs, verses, cries, sounds from clapping and objects turned into instruments abruptly joined together. All the involved artists tapped in as the captivating sonic energy constantly raised.

It was impossible to confine the enthusiasm: once we arrived at the *Musikpavillon* for the second section of the performance, it was difficult to stick to the original dramaturgy. However, we did not try to force the flow into any pre-determined direction because it would not be consistent with our artivist approach. Somehow, once Assan's and Favour's music faded away, people walked on the 'Intersections' stage. As many artists who participated in the dancing march did not go on stage, most of them suddenly turned into viewers looking at the people from the 'real' – and mostly white – audience gathering on stage around the table in front of the black curtain with the writing "Sanctuary of Slavery" on it.

After this moment, the march continued with even more energy and split into two streams: one in the front, where Assan's percussion and Favour's voice could still be heard, and one in the back, circling the speaker and the microphone used by the rappers, who in turn were 'rotating the microphone', i.e. singing one song and then passing the microphone along. Walking through the main streets of Schlanders was a particularly energising moment, especially as the march divided into a front and a second line, which is when the performative event became a kind of public demonstration, making the political aspect of *Sanctuary of Slavery* completely explicit. As the march went finally back to the cloister, Nana and another rapper, Moses Michael, performed their last songs. The end of the show was a moment of collective singing led by Napoleon, which brought back to life the emotional meeting at the Ex-Alimarket camp of two days before. Each participant sang the verses created during that workshop in a finale that seemed to embody,

through a polyvocal celebration, all the meanings of the word *redemption* chosen for this section.

8. Conclusion

The final performance of *Sanctuary of Slavery* was successful insofar as it was incomplete and unperfected. The personal challenge of negotiating between the necessity of doing our job as curators and the strategy of creating an opportunity for the voices of asylum-seeking artists defined our experience throughout the whole process. Nevertheless, the goal of providing a representation of the life of African asylum seekers in South Tyrol that could challenge the dominant narratives and the particular atmosphere of the summer 2018 required both an acceptance of improvised and undetermined contributions and as much distance as possible from our own ambitions as curators.

The level of tension of that summer emerged also in two episodes as the march was proceeding across the main streets of Schlanders. One took place at the front line led by Assan and Favour and another at the second line of street rappers. The marching dance was briefly stopped by Carabinieri, the local gendarmerie, who wanted to question the dancers. However, the intervention of one of the production managers stopped the questioning almost immediately.[10] The line of rappers was instead approached by a male person who at first danced with the artists but then turned confrontational and yelled at them racial slurs and the infamous insult "go back to your country". Both participants and street rappers were not frightened, and the march continued with no significant interruption. Nevertheless, the episodes are interesting as apparently somebody in Schlanders felt threatened by the peaceful unfolding of a cultural performance. As emerged in my conversation about "Diallo" with Nana and Assan, the threat is simultaneously exposed and overcome by the music of African diasporic artists, which was also the case of *Sanctuary of Slavery*.

The Black space created on September 21, 2018, in Schlanders resulted in a strong alliance impermeable to the violence of the surroundings. There is no doubt that one single chance to relocate race through sound within a single event does not establish permanent changes. Nevertheless, it challenged the role of soundmarks in a way that proved permanent. Sounds did create a change in the way Schlanders makes sense of the presence of asylum seekers and provided a different example for the artists and singers of the African

[10] For a video of Carabinieri's car approaching the march and the short interruption that followed, see Afrovocality (2020).

diaspora in South Tyrol. It defined a different sound memory that two years later would find new ways of development and expression. As a matter of fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic asylum seekers successfully resisted racialised profiling practices – they were repeatedly tested and confined – and strengthened alliances with activists who organised the local Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Indeed, in 2020 the musical Black space that was created in Schlanders echoed again in the main streets of Bozen and in several refugee houses.

The sound and vocal reflections we built in the construction and unfolding of *Sanctuary of Slavery* reverberated in the participants' experiences as well as in South Tyrolean society at large. It was an artivist response to violence and discrimination against black bodies that would be reactivated in several future occasions. Music and sound will also continue to reverberate whenever they are needed to negotiate issues of race representation in South Tyrol. The potential of the sound memory that *Sanctuary of Slavery* built was well expressed by Napoleon in his final remarks. He made a reference to New Orleans and the legendary birth of jazz within the pagan rituals based on dance and rhythm at Congo Square in the 19th century. Elaborating on the sonic energy brought by black artists in Schlanders despite a social conflict that often discriminated against them, he said: "I guess that's how Congo Square started. Maybe in a hundred years people will ask how it all started in Silandro".

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STORYTELLING AND ARTIVISM IN CURRENT MIGRATION NARRATIVES
Reshaping and Expanding the Anglophone Postcolonial Literary Canon

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Abstract – This paper assesses the efficacy of artivism in Warsan Shire's poetry and in the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group's digital narrations *28 Tales for 28 Days* (2018). The last decades have witnessed the proliferation of new literary trends and genres which highlight the enduring issues of racism, identity, belonging, and alienation. Enabled by global culture, telecommunication technologies, and the new media, heterogeneous multifaceted literary production engenders narratives that are simultaneously accessible and available to a wider audience. These new paradigms to narrate and negotiate the complexity of current times set forth a performative counter-discourse that relies on language and moving images along with a broader involvement that includes writers, current migrants or descendants of earlier migrants, intellectuals, and common people whose actions and thinking are characterised by both questioning the past and challenging the present. In so doing, this diversified, authorial community envisages and anticipates a better and more just future, while simultaneously reshaping and expanding the Anglophone postcolonial literary canon. Warsan Shire's works, especially the poem "Home", focus on migrants' journey and the reasons compelling them to leave their country of origin; *28 Tales for 28 Days* brings awareness to the United Kingdom government's policy of indefinite detention of migrants by producing web-video first-hand accounts of refugees' experiences read by well-known artists. The Internet thus becomes a collective space where feelings of uprootedness, homelessness, and personal fragmentation find artistic expression.

Keywords: migration narratives; Warsan Shire; *28 Tales for 28 Days*; artivism; transmedia storytelling.

1. Migration, postcolonial literature, and artivism

Nowadays, despite the current interdependence of the world's economies and cultures brought about by cross-border interchange of goods, services, technology, money, information, and people, several groups of human beings are still excluded from moving freely across national borders. Nonetheless, migratory flows do define our age, as put forth by Swedish human rights lawyer and member of the Nobel family, Peter Nobel:

> Some say we live in the era of the Bomb and the migrant. I would say it is the era of the refugee as very few states today encourage anything but marginal immigration and then exclusively in the interest, as it is understood, of that state. The overwhelming majority of the refugees originate in the Third World. The direct causes of their flight are conflicts kept alive mostly by super-power politics and by weapons forged and manufactured at bargain prices in the rich countries, who export death and destruction, and import the natural and partly processed products of the poor countries. At the same time they refuse to a great extent to receive the refugees who try to escape the suffering and the sorrow generated by super power-politics. (Nobel 1988, p. 29)

Based upon Nobel's statement, anthropologist Liisa Helena Malkki argues that "the emergence of the Third World" represented one of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies especially after "the end of official colonialism" (Malkki 1995, p. 504). Arguably, in the twenty-first century, discussing the effects of colonialism might sound anachronistic. However, Ghanaian literary critic and professor of English at Stanford University Ato Quayson asserts that postcolonialism should be considered as a long process:

> [A] possible working definition for postcolonialism is that it involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies and at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire. Postcolonialism often also involves the discussion of experiences such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender and place as well as responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper, as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. (Quayson 2005, pp. 2-3)

The topic of migration continues to occupy a central place in postcolonial intellectuals' and scholars' thinking and reflections. For instance, Indian-New York-based author Suketu Mehta clearly defines the issue of migratory flows as one of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies:

> These days, a great many people in the rich countries complain loudly about migration from the poor ones. But as migrants see it, the game was rigged: First, the rich countries colonized us and stole our treasure and prevented us from building our industries. After plundering us for centuries, they left, having drawn up maps in ways that ensured permanent strife between our communities. Then they brought us to their countries as 'guest workers' – as if they knew what the word 'guest' meant in our cultures – but discouraged us from bringing our families. Having built up their economies with our raw materials and our labor, they asked us to go back and were surprised when we did not. They stole our minerals and corrupted our governments so that their corporations could continue stealing our resources; they fouled the air above us and the waters around us, making our farmers barren, our oceans lifeless; and they were aghast

> when the poorest among us arrived at their borders, not to steal but to work, to clean their shit, and to fuck their men. (Metha 2019, pp. 3-4)

Furthermore, similarly to Quayson's consideration on postcolonialism being concerned with a discussion on migration and slavery, Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips compares present-time migrants' condition to the past subjugation to the former coloniser:

> The asylum seekers, in particular, have migration forced upon them. It doesn't involve chains, it doesn't involve manacles, it doesn't involve physically brutal labor, but the psychological trauma can fester for years. These are not economic migrants who have bought a ticket. Europe is full of people who are psychologically scarred, having cut the umbilical cord with their countries and their languages, as viciously and as traumatically as people did in the past with slavery. (Phillips 2009, p. 12)

Nonetheless, what emerges from Nobel's, Mehta's, and Phillips's observations of the long-lasting issue of migration is the alternative usage of terms referred to migrants. Phillips employs the term *asylum seekers* in relation to migratory flows that characterise present-day Europe, whereas Nobel relies on the term *refugee* and Mehta makes use of the general locution *migrants* besides discussing their condition in a subjective, personalised manner that resembles a first-hand experience. The latter is detectable in the use of the pronouns *they* – i.e. 'the rich countries' – and *us* – i.e. current migrants – every time Mehta addresses his complaints to the former colonisers. As migration has characterised most of human existence, over time individuals leaving or fleeing their home country have been subjected to different definitions.

Since 1982, when the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) was established as part of the University of Oxford's Department of International Development (Queen Elizabeth House) in order to promote the understanding of the causes and consequences of forced migration, scholars have been particularly meticulous in choosing terminology when arguing, considering, and analysing current migrations (Sorgoni 2022, p. 28). At present, or in the era of the refugee as defined by Nobel, "[t]he world […] is on the move" (Andersson 2014, p. 4). However, this sense of motion and mobility is rather a privilege granted to the rich countries and their citizens rather than the whole world:

> Globalization, theorists argue, involves such 'time-space compression' on an unprecedented scale. Yet while some travellers – whether executives, 'expats', or tourists – are celebrated for their powers to shrink distances and connect territories, others are fretted about for the same reasons. The label 'migrants' is usually, and paradoxically, reserved for them. These migrants haunt the rich world […]. What they have in common is their relative poverty and the suspicion attached to their movements – a suspicion that, for some, comes to subsume their whole identity in the eyes of their reluctant hosts. These are the

> 'illegal immigrants', the absolute Others to the dream of a mobile world: those who cannot – or should not – move. (Andersson 2014, p. 4)

In her contextualisation of current-day handling of migratory flows, anthropologist Ruben Andersson criticises the "time-space compression" emphasised by theorists and celebrated by those individuals who can take advantage of globalisation. In point of fact, since 1988 Europe has been surrounded by fences, walls, borders that aim at preventing 'illegal immigrants' from entering. At the same time, the gates of 'Fortress Europe' have given rise to what Andersson defines as the "illegal migration industry" or "illegality industry" (Andersson 2014, pp. 2, 5). As a consequence, "in our high-speed world of resurgent international borders, mobility is paradoxically becoming both a privilege and a stigma" (Andersson 2014, p. 7). This economic, political scenario raises the necessity of properly labelling the so-called 'people on the move' especially when they are fleeing conflict, poverty, and terror, some of whom leaving their home and family behind and undertaking a perilous journey only to reach less than welcoming shores.

The main distinction is among economic migrants, or human beings who can benefit of 'time-space compression', refugees, and asylum seekers. The terms *asylum seeker* and *refugee* are often conflated. An asylum seeker is a 'person' who says that he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been assessed. A refugee has been assessed by a government or by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as set out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, commonly known as the Refugee Convention (AHRC). Countries that have ratified the Convention are obliged to assess asylum seekers' claims for protection. According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is a 'person' who is outside his or her own country and is unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the following grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. More than 140 countries have acceded to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and many of these countries have incorporated the refugee definition of the Convention within national legislation (Sorgoni 2022, pp. 20-21).

Literature, and especially postcolonial literature, mirrors our societies and provides in return a realistic, at times alternative but comprehensive scenario and knowledge of the aggregation of past and present events and human affairs. In addition, literature reflects, absorbs, and explores influences from a variety of fields, and these features are particularly evident in Warsan Shire's poetry and in the digital storytelling of *28 Tales for 28 Days*. In their own way, both set out to highlight and expose the plight of present-day migrants, and display the supplementary feature of social activism, a peculiar quality conferred by Phillips to literary production:

> As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for a change, then we have a chance. […] for literature *is* plurality in action; it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths, it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood. (Phillips 2011, p. 16)

The diversified authorial community of the above-mentioned literary productions on current migrations envisages and anticipates a better and more just future along with simultaneously reshaping and expanding the Anglophone postcolonial literary canon. A broader authorial involvement is also synonym for activism in terms of exposing and defending through storytelling, sometimes in the form of testimony or first-hand narrations, the claim for civil and human rights for those human beings in search for fair, equitable, unprejudiced life conditions. Ultimately, in their storytelling these activist authors rely on art and employ very diverse narrative forms and media. This blending of forms, modes of expression, and production along with cutting-edge technologies, facilitates multimodal creative works, multidimensional forms of protest, and the building of "egalitarian alliances and connections across difference" (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, p. 83). The tendency to take an active part in events, especially in social and political contexts, has characterised human behaviour, in one form or another, since time immemorial, manifesting itself in every part of the world and in every culture, as pointed out by Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei:

> Throughout history, political and social change only existed in the forms we knew because protest actions, be they violent or peaceful, were carried out with a lack of resources, especially in terms of communications. Individuals could mobilize and share information with others only to a limited extent. Such circumstances posed obstacles to protest actions that people can take and hindered the impact of their efforts. Today, we are in a very different world. The Internet and computer technologies liberate individuals and let them act as one. Ideas, plans and actions can be shared with others at lightning speed, and anyone may participate autonomously. New technologies finally enable humans to truly act as individuals. We no longer need to ask where an idea comes from. It gets shared quickly, and other individuals can carry it out within a short period of time. The real revolution is in each individual's mind. Everybody has to learn to become different from how they perceive themselves. The ways of bringing change and facing political and social struggles have become very different from the previous era. The work of individuals and the path to social change will continue to surprise us. (Weiwei 2011)

Indeed "the path to social change" has surprised us especially over the last two decades thanks to constantly up-do-date, user friendly, and accessible digital devices. Politically and socially active artists rely on them and deliver in return works of aesthetic value that fall under the umbrella term of *artivism*, a combination of *art* and *activism*, a hybrid neologism "that signifies work

created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism" (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, p. 82) and might be understood here as a critical process that disrupts one-dimensional explanations of current migrations and the dominant paradigm of refugee crisis deployed by the member states of the European Union and the media.

Artivism took roots in the late 1990s in gatherings between Chicano artists from East Los Angeles and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, with the intent of shedding light on the issues of race and ethnicity within white American society (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, pp. 92-93). Since then, artivism has developed following the proliferation of protests against wars and globalisation. In many cases, artivists attempt to promote political agendas through the means of art. Besides using traditional media like film and music to raise awareness or push for change, artivists can also be involved in culture jamming, subvertising, street art, spoken word, protesting, and activism (Milohnić 2005). For instance, in a talk given at a Chattanooga TEDx event in 2014, spoken word artist and activist Marcus Ellsworth introduced his speech on how to help build community around art and issues of social justice with the following words: "Art as activism, another way of saying it would be art as a bringer of change, art as a way to connect people, to engage people, to motivate and move people to action" (TEDx Talks 2014, 00:09-00:24).

Eve Ensler – playwright, performer, feminist, and activist – expands on Ellsworth's definition of artivism. Acknowledging a twofold but divergent meaning of change, Ensler frames artivism in terms of passion as a creative, militant response to power:

> It is easily argued that violent revolutions, war and repression bring about the most immediate, obvious change. But I think we need to look at what we mean by change. Terror and violence can change a given political situation and keep the population in line. But these tactics simply change one dominant force for another. Methods of passion involve a deeper, more transformational process: inviting commitment, vision and long-term struggle. All these can bring about lasting change both in the individual and the community. Methods of passion model the world we want to create. I have had my moments of rage where I think the powers that be will never end oppression or inequity voluntarily. But I do not trust these moments of violence within me. Passion is persuasive. Power is dominating. Passion is contagious and inspirational. Power is threatening and coercive. Passion moves people. Power controls them. I think in these perilous times, a third way is emerging, a kind of escalated passion – a creative energy that comes from giving one's heart and soul and imagination to the struggle. Not aggression but fierceness. Not hurting but confronting. Not violating but disrupting. This passion has all the ingredients of activism, but is charged with the wild creations of art. Artivism – where edges are pushed, imagination is freed, and a new language emerges altogether. (Ensler 2011)

Pushing edges, freeing imagination, and employing a language that can be understood by an enlarged audience may be read as keywords to *28 Tales for*

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28 Days and Shire's digitally creative and emphatic literary works. They both stem from collective productions thought, developed, and created by writers, artists, passionate human beings who aim to "bring […] change and fac[e] political and social struggles" (Weiwei 2011) related to current migrations and Western political agendas that strongly hinder them by surrounding 'Fortress Europe' with fences, walls, borders, simultaneously attempting to arouse nationalistic passions against foreigners.

2. Warsan Shire: from printed prose to performance poetry

Born to Somali parents in Kenya but raised in London, Warsan Shire is among a generation of young poets who have attracted a larger audience by initially publishing their poetry online. Besides providing immediate visibility, Internet platforms such as social networks and YouTube also encourage poets to track their follower counts and engagement rates. Shire first became prominent through Tumblr, which functions as a sort of virtual mood board where selfies, music, and poetry can be posted randomly, and later on her Twitter and Instagram accounts, which count thousands of followers.[1] To reach Somali refugees and support their cause, instead, she usually relies on Facebook. She also supports the cause of the African women feminist movement along with engaging herself in conversations in the form of interviews or podcasts about migration and racism every time an opportunity is given to her. In 2014, the visibility gained on the World Wide Web conferred her the title of London's Youth Poet Laureate. To a larger audience, she is best known for having collaborated in 2016 with American singer Beyoncé on *Lemonade*, a visual album in which the singer's music is interspersed with Shire's poetry.

Nonetheless, her social and political engagement does not exempt her from exploring alternative ways of storytelling. Her narrative has been composed for a variety of media, ranging from print distribution to audio recordings to online circulation. In 2011, she released her first printed narrative: the pamphlet *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* published by London-based flipped eye publishing, a company that promotes original poetry and prose on a not-for-profit model. This brief publication, barely over thirty pages, contains poems and short stories that chiefly elicit the dichotomy of longing for home while searching for a new place to call home. In her narration, Shire deals with the issues of migration, war, trauma, patriarchal violence, racism, and language also from a feminist point of view as emerges, for instance, in the two-lines poem "In Love and in War":

[1] Lately, Shire has been using Twitter and Instagram as a showcase for her published works rather than a virtual space containing everyday thoughts, reflections on migration and racism, images, and videos to be shared with the online community.

> To my daughter I will say,
> 'when the men come, set yourself on fire'.
> (Shire 2011, p. 34)

Allegedly, this motherly piece of advice might be an aftermath of foremothers' memories caught in the worst turmoil of conflicts that have been taking place across Africa.

It may be argued that Shire's lyrical feminist writing is related to sociologist Michael Scott Kimmel's theorisation on patriarchy. Kimmel asserts that patriarchy is a system deeply rooted in imperialism, racism, and capitalism and that one of its facets, manhood – or the composite of qualities, such as courage, determination, and vigour that supposedly characterise adult male humans – is culture-bound:

> Manhood means different things at different times to different people. We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and, above all, women. (Kimmel 2010, p. 59)

On the basis of this, it follows that the term *patriarchy* chiefly implies male domination and prejudice against women, even though it is important to bear in mind that the *concept* of patriarchy, which has been developed within feminist theory, has a whole variety of different meanings. On the whole, patriarchy is a form of social organisation in which a male is head of a social unit, be it a family or a tribe. In this social unit, the patriarch has legitimate power over every member of the community, and descent and kinship along with title are traced through the male line. However, on a larger extent, patriarchy includes any social, political, or economic mechanism that evokes male dominance over women (Beechey 1979, p. 66).

In January 1969, left-wing political essayist, journalist, activist, feminist, and pop music critic Ellen Willis and radical feminist, writer, and activist Shulamith Firestone started a group called Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement (Willis 1984, pp. 96-97), whose "Manifesto" reads:

> Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behavior is enforced by the threat of physical violence. […] We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest. All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic

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> and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women. (Redstockings 2023)

Kimmel, Willis, and Firestone recognise women as an oppressed class. Both definitions mirror similarities, even though the main concept – men dominate women – represents a double oppression for women who live within a patriarchal community and – as for Shire – are also a visible minority in a country with a colonial history where white Western culture is omnipresent.

Shire's poetic voice remarks on the unbalanced female-male relationship through the usage of metaphors of the woman's body, which, in this context, is both the metaphoric and the literary location of pain:

> Her body is a flooding home.
> […]
> She is a boat docking in from war,
> her body, a burning village, a prison
> with open gates.
> (Shire 2011, p. 30)

> You are her mother.
> Why did you not warn her,
> hold her like a rotting boat
> and tell her that men will not love her
> if she is covered in continents,
> if her teeth are small colonies,
> if her stomach is an island
> if her thighs are borders?
> her hands are a civil war,
> a refugee camp behind each ear,
> a body littered with ugly things.
> (Shire 2011, pp. 31-32)

These extracts are undisguised examples of Shire's employment of metaphors with references to conflicts and, as earlier offered for consideration by Malkki, to the effects of colonialism: "her hands are a civil war, / a refugee camp behind each ear, / a body littered with ugly things". In relation to physicality, Shire also seems to reproduce in her writing one of Bill Ashcroft's statements: "The body itself has also been the literal 'text' on which colonization has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages" (Ashcroft *et al.* 1995, p. 322).

Shire's act of addressing her homeland as female is arguably a relic of the colonial past. Within the realm of postcolonial criticism, the colonial space or the occupied territory is personified as female, whereas the act of conquering and colonising is associated with maleness. This binary opposition – female/male as well as object/subject (the latter in terms of the one who

performs or controls the action) – goes back to the eighteenth century, when the increase of sea voyages for scientific purposes or for the spread of Christianity allowed a more extensive encounter with the Other. The consequent collision of cultures along with the subjugation of peoples considered 'inferior' was grounded on a Eurocentric supremacist perspective, as put forth by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin:

> Such knowledge [of the overseas countries] also directly facilitated exploitation and intervention, processes whose real effects are reflected in phrases like 'the opening up of Africa'. Such a phrase also suggests the gendering of landscape and the associations between sexuality and exploration and conquest. 'Virgin territories' (never virgin, but the inhabitants were considered to be uncivilized and thus having no legal rights of ownership) were opened up by exploration to trade and settlement, their original inhabitants killed, displaced or marginalized within European settler communities. (Ashcroft *et al.* 2003, pp. 89-90)

Besides the employment of metaphors, Shire also relies on the literary device of repetition. Words such as *men*, *boat*, *home* might be referred to as keywords as they are spread over the other poems and short stories collected in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011). Clear evidence can be found for instance in "Conversation about Home (at the Deportation Centre)", a story made of four paragraphs which are distributed over four pages. Written in 2009, the short story was inspired by the author's visit to the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome, where some young refugees found shelter and turned the building into their home (Bausells, Shearlaw 2015). However, the refugees' deliberate act of occupation of a safe African location in a hostile host country may be interpreted as a paradox. Shire's strategy to distribute the short story over four pages might be read as an attempt to both emphasise the refugees' sense of displacement and somehow mirror their discontinuous journeys, which are often characterised by perilous travel conditions, stopovers where they are dehumanised by their abysmal condition, and unwelcoming arrival destinations. In point of fact, the first paragraph begins with the narrating voice's discouraging reflection: "Well, I think home spat me out" (Shire 2011, p. 24); on the following page, the second paragraph is introduced by questioning her/his point of origin in a way that corroborates Ashcroft's concept of the body as a "literal 'text'":

> They ask me *how did you get here*? Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket […] Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body. (Shire 2011, p. 25, emphasis in the original)

Carrying on with the analogies between the senses and the body as a literal text, the third paragraph focuses on the issues of identity along with the dichotomy belonging/longing that manifest themselves in the host country:

> I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome. […] My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory […] the distance I am from home. (Shire 2011, p. 26)

Lastly, in the fourth paragraph the narrating voice elucidates the awareness of being *persona non grata* immigrants and refugees carry with them as soon as they have to deal with the hostile host community: "I hear them say *go home*, I hear them say *fucking immigrants, fucking refugees*" (Shire 2011, p. 27). Besides giving rise to unreconcilable and fragmented identities, this hateful, inhospitable reception develops into a further act of psychological violence that does increase and exacerbate their sense of displacement and precariousness, as put forth by Phillips:

> The first time one is called a 'nigger' or told 'go back to where you come from', one's identity is traduced and a great violence is done to one's sense of self. Thereafter, one fights a rearguard action to keep other elements of oneself in focus, and it's hard to get through the day without the shoulder coming into play. I don't mean the 'chip on the shoulder', I mean the 'the glance over the shoulder'. Once somebody has mounted a stealth attack on a part of who you are, you had better be wary for you know it's coming again. (Phillips 2011, pp. 123-124)

In response to the global refugee crises of the twenty-first century, in 2017 Shire converted the short story into the performance poem "Home", which was subsequently published as a prose poem in the author's recent collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022). "Home" captures the pain and trauma of the refugee experience, and, as Shire averred during an interview, was written, "for them, for [her] family and for anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way" (Bausells, Shearlaw 2015).

The words, figures of speech, and stylistic strategies employed in the poem vividly depict the journey made by human beings fleeing conflict, poverty, and terror along with their brutal living conditions of undocumented individuals in Europe. By recounting the refugees' constant struggle for survival, the text poignantly raises the Western audience's awareness of present-day migrations and unsettles the concept of 'home'. As a matter of fact, even though the term usually evokes a feeling of belonging and implies sympathetic, compassionate, and unhesitating acceptance, in the poem the place that usually represents both a domicile and one's national identity becomes so hostile that 'unwanted residents' are forced to leave: "You only leave home when home won't let you stay" (Shire 2022, p. 24).

It may be argued that Shire's performance poetry may be envisioned as a return to orality or, borrowing Northern Irish linguistic anthropologist Ruth

Finnegan's definition, a return to "oral art as literature" whose vehicle of transmission becomes the given performance (Finnegan 2012, pp. 3-6). The past couple of decades have witnessed an accelerating shift in perspectives on the dynamics of storytelling and of making a stand for a better and more just future in general. However, this shift is particularly evident in the field of postcolonial studies and human rights advocacy. The recent performance-centred perspective carried along with the daily, common use of always up-to-date technologies and free and available platforms on the Internet allow for a growing awareness of the role of individual creativity. Shire's poetry is a clear example of a shift from written strategies employed in the short story published in her first pamphlet to visual and audible strategies employed in gaining a wider audience with a shorter but more incisive version of *Conversation About Home (at the Deportation Centre)*.

3. *28 Tales for 28 Days*: a digital activist action

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group is a registered charity that offers support to people held in indefinite immigration detention in the United Kingdom. Clearly stated in their motto "Supporting people during and after detention" (*GDWG* n.d.), their mission is to assist newly arrived migrants, refugee asylum seekers, and those arrested for illegal staying. This charity is a project of humanitarian activism that reveals the entangled, and often impenetrable, links between language and culture that have created an inhumane immigration system in the United Kingdom, a former colonising country that identified itself as the 'mother country'. It was set up in 1995 in response to the UK Immigration Service as it began to detain people at a small holding centre near Gatwick Airport and instantly exhibited its militant activist agency. It is a non-party political organisation that made itself known chiefly on the Internet. Its well-designed website is a recipient that contains practical and legal information for migrants and refugees, updated news, links to social media such as Facebook and Twitter along with other helpful contact channels. In addition, its website becomes a virtual space where stories are transformed into podcasts and videos that function as evidence of the migrants' journey from their home country to the United Kingdom and their life conditions as unwanted human beings in the hostile host country. Moreover, the website is accessed by a wide audience that add comments, intervene, and launch crowdfunding actions.

In 2014, David Herd – poet, professor of modern literature, activist – and Anna Pincus – director of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group – launched a wider campaign in defence of migrants' rights. They increased the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group's commitment to support people affected by immigration detention and expanded the original website by adding a new

link to a further project of humanitarian activism named "Refugee Tales", which draws on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1388) for inspiration. Since 2015, every summer through the English countryside, "walks of solidarity" have taken place over several days of trekking and storytelling. The storytelling that occurs during the event is then turned into a collection of stories published by Comma Press, a not-for-profit Manchester-based publisher and development agency. So far, Herd and Pincus have edited four volumes titled *Refugee Tales* (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) – the fifth is going to be published in the summer of 2024.

This additional form of activism that was brought to life on the Internet with an explicit literary viewpoint has originated a remarkable role reversal. It has given a platform and humanity to the often-voiceless Others, outsiders – the 'typical' characters of postcolonial literature – who now have the chance to become the authors of their own narratives. Their life experiences are told to volunteers who share the core values of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Refugee Tales Project. Among these volunteers are well-known postcolonial writers such as Abdulrazak Gurnah (winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021), Jackie Kay, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, Kamila Shamsie, Gillian Slovo, and many more. These first-hand life experiences told by impromptu storytellers are later transcribed, and on this occasion a collaborative, synergic relationship between the improvised teller and the celebrity writer takes place. The latter, that is to say the well-established and by now canonical postcolonial author, momentarily sets aside his/her own writing style and narrative techniques to let the teller's voice predominate on paper. In contrast to the way the migrants are muted or written out of legal and bureaucratic discourse, the tales open up a space for their voices and their language to be heard. These are stories told and shared so that people listen to a new discourse but above all they give voice to refugees who can ultimately talk about their no-win situations to listeners who have ears to hear and willingness to transmit that experience without distortion or prejudice.

The Refugee Tales Project holds a relevant place among 20th- and 21st-century responses to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The project comprises collections of tales published in textual editions alongside a politically embodied campaign launched in 2018 to call an end to the practice of indefinite detention of those regarded as illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom. Moreover, it is also one important example of transmedia and visual communication. "The Refugee Tales Statement", created to draw attention to indefinite detention carried out by the British government, was recorded in front of a camera, uploaded on both the 28 Tales for 28 Days website and YouTube. The video runs two minutes and forty-seven seconds, and in this frame of time, activist, famous writers, and actors, who have about five to six seconds each, join together to spread the voice of the often-voiceless Others. In the span of approximately three minutes, they claim justice and human

rights, and call for a change in the law in addition to suggesting immigration detention be limited to only twenty-eight days. Concurrently with the launch of the campaign, in order to attract a wider audience and raise awareness of indefinite detention, each day for twenty-eight days a tale was released, posted on the website with the opening lines "Come back each day to hear why the law must change. End indefinite detention", and made available on YouTube.

The 28 Tales for 28 Days website home page looks like a calendar, a table showing thirty-three squares which are hyperlinks. If Internet users click on squares labelled by numbers from one to twenty-eight, they are then redirected to a video of the reading of a tale performed by participants in "The Refugee Tales Statement" (the first square in the third row). Some of them are also contributors whose names and short biographies are listed on the last pages of the four volumes. The first square – "Refugee Tales" – redirects visitors to the project's aims and purposes and is followed by the numbered hyperlinks. Emulating the structure of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, in the first video award-winning English actor and activist Jeremy Irons reads the *Prologue* written by Herd and published in the first volume. It is an introduction to the project that already in the first stanza clearly states in black and white the activist nature of "Refugee Tales" as detected in keywords such as 'welcome', 'criminalises', 'human movement', and 'solidarity':

> This prologue is not a poem
> It is an act of welcome
> It announces
> That people present
> Reject the terms
> Of a debate that criminalises
> Human movement
> It is a declaration
> This night in Shepherdswell
> Of solidarity.
> (Herd 2016, p. v)

This process shows how the pervasiveness of new media affects storytelling and literature. The synergy among disciplines that gives rise to a new, accessible, and inclusive literature, not to mention opening the canon to new forms of writing, is increasingly emphasised in the contemporary phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling, a concept coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins. Transmedia storytelling (also known as transmedia narrative or multiplatform storytelling) is the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies and attracting larger audiences (Jenkins 2008).

Moreover, the video "The Refugee Tale Statement" is itself a digital example of social and political engagement, an example of inclusion (the switch between genders as well as the switch between white and black

individuals, between migrants and black British citizens, between famous and ordinary people), and eventually an example of the convergence of new media and traditional storytelling. In point of fact, the video comes with default subtitles, a preset value that undoubtedly provides a full understanding of the statement, not to mention the yellow-highlighted keywords that contribute to the comprehension of the recorded message. According to sociologist Marshall McLuhan "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 2013, p. 14), and this video becomes an agency by which the claim for a time limit to immigration detention is conveyed. Furthermore, relying on Jenkins's theories, transmedia storytelling is a process whereby the elements of a fiction or a non-fiction are dispersed systematically across multiple media for the purpose of creating a unified experience. Transmedia storytelling integrates two dimensions: (1) the construction of an official narrative that gets dispersed across multiple media and platforms; (2) the active participation of users in this expansive process. User participation may adopt different forms: simple viral reproduction of content, manipulation of a text (remix, parodies, and so on) and, specifically in this context, redistribution, active participation in online communities, creation of narrative extensions (Atarama-Rojas 2019, pp. 3-5).

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group initial process of collaboration becomes a collective endeavour especially because it is an integral stage in the creation of a public space of social action. Twenty years after its foundation, the charity group continues to advocate for the end of indefinite detention and to release new editions of "Refugee Tales". The "Tales" have attracted media attention, active participation, and involvement, while exploring new forms of storytelling that draw on, overlap, and intersect with different disciplines, mirroring an openness to experimentation with form and content that often characterises literature, and in the process, the Refugee Tales Project itself has become literature.

4. Migration narratives as activist storytelling

Warsan Shire's poetry and *28 Tales for 28 Days* digital activist storytelling are both a distinctive example of the way literature, specifically contemporary migration literature, blends with artivism. This blending mirrors Milohnić's definition of artivism. Not only do *28 Tales for 28 Days* and Shire's community engage in pushing political agendas by the means of art but also focus on raising social and technological consciousness, that is to say making people aware of the usefulness and availability of technology for communication. Besides using traditional media like video and music to raise awareness or push for change, they are also involved in spoken word poetry, protesting, and activism, and above all they rely on not-for-profit volunteer work and publishing houses (Milohnić 2005).

The organisation of people, ideas, and other resources is at the core of activism. In addition, as put forth by photographer, computer programmer, and sociologist Brian Alleyne, the technological dimension has taken on greater importance in contemporary social movements. The ability to use these new technologies is important for activists wanting to constitute, expand, and sustain their projects as they are 'force multipliers' for the collective generation of knowledge in which all activists must engage in order to pursue goals for social change (Alleyne 2002, pp. 79-80).

Shire's interviews, conversations, delivered speeches along with her literary production become a multimedia mixture of visual-oral-written communication. In the current digital age, moreover, multimodal narrations become "movement of information" (McLuhan 2013, p. 97). In so doing, contemporary authors like Shire address the issues of migration and racism producing transnational political dialogue that travels across digital space and creates, in return, a new way to stand out in the cultural industry as well as in the World Wide Web by engaging Western audience, scholars, and intellectuals in new ways of reading literature. It is not accidental, then, that Shire's line "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" (Shire 2022, p. 24) has become the worldwide rallying call for refugees and their advocates.

28 Tales for 28 Days and by extension the Refugee Tales Project represent, among other things, a form of digital activism. Brought to life on the Internet by authors and activists taking advantage of up-to-date technologies to make themselves known, first in the United Kingdom, and from there, borrowing Phillips's definition of literature, "travelling furiously across borders and boundaries" (Phillips 2001, p. 5). Their activist actions and political stand do travel across digital space and geographical limits which are established only by agreement between governments. During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the annual 'walks of solidarity' took place online on the YouTube channel where the Refugee Tales community virtually gathered to "call for a future without detention" (Refugee Tales n.d.). Following Herd's suggestion, photographs of bridges encountered along the way were sent and posted online. It may be argued that those bridges may be symbols of crossing and making connections:

> If there is one good consequence of lockdown Refugee Tales, it is that this year at least, anybody can join in. […] But this year people are joining from across the world, joining in solidarity in the call for a future without immigration detention. In order that we can make that shared call vivid, please let us know via our website, where you are and where you are walking. And please, when you see one, take and send us a photo of a bridge. We are making bridges this year, and we are crossing borders. (Refugee Tales 2020, 05:57-06:49)

Camelia Crisan and Dumitru Bortun define digital stories as strong pieces of evidence to support a particular cause: the narrator is the interpretative advocate for the case which is uploaded online and made available for anyone browsing the Internet and watching. Digital stories can be tools in calling to action because they elicit emotions, reveal the journey of their narrator, and provide first-hand account of events (Crisan, Bortun 2017, p. 156). For Warsan Shire, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Refugee Tales Project, online platforms thus become the collective space defined by Arendt: the process through which individuals reconstruct their personal experiences and enter a collective space where feelings of alienation and personal fragmentation find artistic expression in text, image, and sound (Arendt 1998, pp. 176-181).

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ACTING OUT FOR SURVIVAL
Environmental Performance Poetry in the Pacific

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Abstract – Climate change is the most urgent issue of the present. The countries of the Pacific Rim seem to be particularly vulnerable to its effects, as shown by the growing intensity and magnitude of extreme weather events like typhoons, cyclones, and floods. In the Southern Hemisphere, atolls are in danger due to the rise of global sea levels. Archipelagic countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands are already experiencing the migration of their citizens from the outer islands to the main islands, and from the main ones to Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the West coast of the USA. Poets and artists in this area have been engaged for some time in public performances to denounce the environmental emergency and sensitise global public opinion. Oral poetry is performed in public events and international official venues but is also recorded in videos, which are then uploaded to the poets' websites. Words, acting, music, and images of the natural landscape that is at risk are turned into dramatic pieces that could be defined as a form of 'environmental artivism'. After poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's performance at the 2014 UN Climate Summit in New York, four Pacific Islander spoken word artists were selected from an international contest to perform at the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris. My article will illustrate how Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry led the way in this form of artistic activism and will then analyse some works of two of the contest-winners: Terisa Siagatonu, a Samoan American poet from the Bay Area, and Eunice Andrada, a Filipina poet, educator, and social worker living in Australia. These three poets exemplify a type of artist/poet/performer who believes that art creates and inspires change.

Key Words: performance poetry; transpacific ecopoetics; Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner; Terisa Siagatonu; Eunice Andrada.

1. The climate crisis in the Pacific Rim

The climate emergency is certainly the most urgent issue of our time. The word *unprecedented* has become a constant in the media with reference to unusual weather conditions occurring on our planet on a regular basis. The countries of the Pacific Rim[1] seem to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate

[1] The term *Pacific Rim* refers to the geographic area surrounding the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Rim covers the western shores of North and South America, the shores of eastern Asia, Aotearoa New

change. Six South-Asian countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam – are among the world's twenty countries most vulnerable to climate (NTS-Asia 2023) due to the growing intensity and magnitude of extreme weather events like typhoons, cyclones, and floods. As to the Southern Hemisphere, during the 2019-2020 summer extreme drought caused several mega-bushfires of unprecedented intensity in Australia, which expanded the ozone hole, ultimately contributing to global warming (Coleman 2022). The smoke was visible even from Aotearoa New Zealand,[2] another country now affected by regular cycles of droughts and floods. Moreover, the emergency of the so-called 'sinking islands' is no longer a threat but a reality. Coral atolls in the Pacific are being constantly flooded by the ocean due to sea-level rise caused by the melting of continental ice sheets and the expansion of sea water as ocean temperatures slowly increase. The consequences of this phenomenon are coastal and land erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources, degradation of ecosystems, and lack of food security. Many outer low-lying islands in archipelagos, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, are no more liveable – a fact that, in turn, results in internal migration toward the main islands and external migration to Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the western coast of the USA. Climate-induced migration equates to loss of identity and threats to sovereignty (Kempf, Hermann 2014; Mcleod *et al.* 2019; Smith 2013).

Political leaders and environmental activists from the region's most affected areas have been denouncing the hazards their countries are exposed to for a long time in formal meetings and forums at all levels, locally and internationally. Notably, the United Nations Climate Change conference – the so-called COP, that is, Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC[3] – stands out as a paramount platform for the highest-level discourse on this matter. Its aim is to prevent "'dangerous' human interference with the climate system [and] stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations 'at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system'" (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-a).[4] The concern of the Convention seems, however, to have moved from actions of *prevention* to measures of *mitigation* and *adaptation* in the course of time. COP 27, which

Zealand, and Australia, and the islands of the Pacific (roughly corresponding to the whole Oceania).

[2] Aotearoa is the Māori name of New Zealand. It means 'the land of the long white cloud', which is the image seen by the Polynesian explorers when they arrived, presumably in the late 13th century (King 2003, p. 16; Te Ara 2020).

[3] UNFCCC stands for United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 198 countries that have ratified the Convention are called Parties to the Convention. The Conference takes place every year and involves an increasing number of government officials from all over the world as well as representatives from civil society and the global news media.

[4] For further details on the COP, see United Nations Climate Change (n.d.-b); for the complete list of COP sessions, see United Nations Climate Change (n.d.-c).

took place in Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt) in November 2022, was in fact about mitigation, adaptation, and finance (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-d).[5]

2. The rise of Pacific environmental performance poetry: Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

Environmental poetry has had a role in some of the most recent UN conferences. A new generation of 'spoken word artists' or 'poet-performers' has in fact risen in the Pacific Rim countries as militant figures that compose environmental poetry and act it out on websites, during public performances, and in important political venues such as the COP. Unlike textual poetry, which is written mainly to be published and read, spoken word poetry or performance poetry is meant to be acted aloud before an audience. The performer typically uses rhythm and emotion to try to draw in and connect with the listeners. Spoken word poetry often includes rhyme, repetition, play on words, and improvisation, and may incorporate such devices as music, dance, and sound. Its themes usually cover such issues as current events, politics, social justice, or race. Examples of spoken word include rap, hip-hop, and slam poetry: genres that are now widespread all over the world.

Pacific environmental performance poetry can be described as a form of artivism, a portmanteau word combining *art* and *activism* which was first used with reference to the Chicano Art Movement's struggle for political and social justice in the USA from the late 1960s (Gunckel 2015; Panda 2021). Environmentally motivated art, environmental artivism, or creative environmentalism has become a rising object of interest in academic literature, and the increasing number of related publications situates it as a stimulating constituent of action towards sustainability (Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 2). Environmental artivism, which includes paintings, sculptures, dramatic performances, bioart, dance, choreographies, films, visual media, but also decolonial or Indigenous narratives, aims at achieving three major goals:

> The first one is the education of audiences through performative expressions of today's global environmental crises, especially climate change. The second one involves ecocritical reflections of environmental controversies and conflicts towards creative emancipatory practices. The third one positions art practice as an avenue for environmental improvement across different sectors (e.g. water, mining, urban) with involvement of citizens, governments, and corporate actors. (Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 1)

[5] The latest Conference convened from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-e). The next Conference will convene in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024.

Environmental poet-performers in the Pacific pursue all of these aims, conjugating tradition and modernity. On one hand, they continue the tradition of Indigenous oral poetry engaging directly with their audience in public readings, dramatisations of poems, or slam sessions[6]. On the other, technological progress allows them to transform an ancient genre into a multimodal expression that can reach very large audiences through the World Wide Web. Poetry, accompanied by film images or pictures, sounds, music, and improvisation, is recorded in videos and uploaded to YouTube (or other platforms) and to the authors' websites (if they have one). Some of the poets have also printed collections, like Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Eunice Andrada, providing written texts that are however subject to change in the oral or video performances.[7]

It should be now considered why performance poetry seems to be more effective than textual poetry in conveying environmental issues. In her essay about slam poetry, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett investigates the reasons for the success of slam poetry as a means to affirm identity and identity politics, especially of marginalised gender, class, sexual, and racial identities (Somers-Willet 2005, pp. 53-54). Quoting Damon (1998, pp. 329-330), she underlines that, "the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of 'realness'-authenticity [...] that effects a 'felt change of consciousness' on the part of the listener" (Somers-Willett 2005, p. 53). Somers-Willett also agrees with Silliman (1998, p. 362) on the fact that, although this result may be found in any kind of poetry, textual or performed, "it is most amplified 'through the poem as confession of lived experience', […] 'not in print but *in person*'", since the live performance maximises "'the authenticity and sincerity'" (Somers-Willett 2005, p. 53). Moreover, Rodriguez-Labajos includes dramatic performances among the embodied and sensorial expressions (like dance and bioart), underlining that "through sensorial experiences, performative practices problematize the need of urgent action" (Rodrigues-Labajos 2022, p. 4) and have a unique "transformative capacity" (Rodrigues-Labajos 2022, p. 5).

An example of spoken word poetry as confession of lived experience and embodied expression applying to the five senses, which proved effective in involving an entire assembly, is the performance of Marshallese poet and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner at the opening ceremony of the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit in New York, during which she described, first-hand, the disastrous consequences of climate change on the Marshall Islands. After an introduction of herself and her country, including references to myth drawn from traditional oral literature, she turned to a passionate speech about the dangers of climate change in her region, followed by a performance of "Dear

[6] Competitive versions of poetry readings usually staged in bars, bookstores, coffeehouses, universities, and theatres.

[7] See Andrada's collections *Take Care* (2021) and *Flood Damages* (2018), and Jetñil-Kijiner's collection *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (2017).

Matafele Peinam", a poem addressed to her baby daughter and a manifesto of the creative activism that is animating the poets of the Pacific Rim. The text describes the catastrophic consequences of global warming for many low-lying islands in the Pacific, which risk being submersed by the ocean if global temperatures rise.[8] The poet's aim, however, was not only to denounce the gravity of the situation, shake the world's indifference to the imminent disaster and call for support. Jetñil-Kijiner also wanted to look authentic, prompting a process of identification between the audience and Marshallese people.

Her poem is indeed a mix of material facts and lyricism, real events and intense emotions, scientific/formal language and the intimate/colloquial words of a mother talking to her little daughter, showing Pacific islanders as living human beings whose home and culture are at risk. Technically a dramatic monologue, it also describes the chubby body of the baby addressee, mixing natural ("sunrise") and religious ("buddha") references to highlight the sacred value of any life that generates from her endangered country and must be saved:

> you are a seven month old *sunrise* of gummy smiles
> you are bald as an egg and bald as the *buddha*"
> (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, p. 70, emphases added)

The list of the hazards that the child might have to face in the future (i.e. being devoured by the beautiful lagoon or wandering as a rootless migrant without a home) is followed by the promise that her mother, relatives, politicians, and all Marshallese people will fight to avoid the disaster. After the confessional tone of the beginning, the poem becomes militant: it attacks climate negationism and scepticism, laments the status of non-existence of the Marshall Islands for most people of the 'First World', and connects their condition to that of other countries suffering from global warming effects like sea-level rise (Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Maldives), typhoons (the Philippines), and floods (Pakistan, Algeria, and Colombia). The appearance of her husband and daughter near her at the end of the performance, dressed in their traditional attire, offered a concrete picture of a family in the flesh rather than a vague idea of unknown 'others' in a faraway land or figures in an academic or scientific essay, and prompted the assembly's standing ovation (Jetñil-Kijiner 2014). The physical image of the pretty chubby little girl, in presence as well as in the video performance of the poem on Jetñil-Kijiner's website, leads the public through the above-mentioned sensorial experience and change of consciousness described by Rodriguez-Labajos and Somers-Willet.

[8] Keeping the global temperature rise well below 2 degrees Celsius by 2100 is in fact the international climate policy goal, officially set in the Paris agreement of COP 21 signed in 2015 (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-f).

3. Contesting the western view of the Pacific

The need to make the voice of Pacific islanders heard and their territories visible to the 'First-World' powers is longstanding. Modern cartography has helped obliterate the Pacific region by re-conceptualising space and re-naming places. Otto Heim calls these two acts erasure and (re)inscription (Heim 2015, p. 181), underlining how they were the constitutive operations of European cartography. Maps and atlases were functional to imperial powers: first Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands throughout the 16th century, then Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the USA in the 19th century. Maps and atlases represented the Pacific as a lost sea, *terra nullius*, thereby justifying its colonisation and the plundering of its resources. They reproduced a vision of the ocean "clear of data irrelevant to navigational purposes" (Heim 2015, p. 183) and depicted the islands as mere anchoring points in an ocean which becomes the natural space for free trade. Therefore, "they foster[ed] the notion of a socially empty space" and contributed to forming the idea of the Pacific "not as a place to live but an expanse to cross, a void to be filled with lines of transit" (Heim 2015, p. 184).

In his seminal essay "Our Sea of Islands" (1993), the sociologist of Tongan origin Epeli Hau'ofa counterargued that Oceania was based on a dense network of relationships and that its inhabitants considered the sea their home. They were skilled navigators and sailed long distances to trade, marry, visit relatives, and expand their knowledge or wealth. The boundaries erected by imperial powers did not exist for Pacific islanders, who shared blood and culture, and were connected, rather than divided, by the sea. So much so that Hau'ofa rejects the western vision of Oceania as small "islands in a far sea" and suggests the holistic image of "a sea of islands" (Hau'ofa 2008, p. 37).

The western idea of the Pacific as an empty space justified the division of the region into island states in the course of time, according to the economic needs of imperial powers, disrupting local economies and self-sufficiency, and creating forms of neo-colonialism after the collapse of the European empires. It also encouraged the destruction of entire territories to extract mineral resources. An example is the island of Banaba after its annexation to the British Gilbert and Ellice Island Group in 1901. Banaba was transformed into a major phosphate-mining settlement and exploited by Australian, New Zealand, and British companies. When it became apparent that it would, in time, become uninhabitable, the residents were relocated to Rabi Island in northern Fiji (Edwards 2014, pp. 123-124).

The image of the Pacific as 'terra nullius' finally allowed the French and American governments to use the atolls as sites for nuclear testing. Nearly two hundred nuclear experiments were conducted on Fangataufa and Moruroa

atolls, in French Polynesia, between 1966 and 1996. France has consistently underestimated their devastating impact. The explosions severely contaminated the environment of the archipelago and exposed its population to dangerous radiation levels. In 1998, the French defence minister finally admitted that the population of the islands of Tureia, Reao, Pukarua, Mangareva and Tahiti were affected by radioactive fallout (Henley 2021; see also Nuclear Risks n.d.).

Bomb testing was also conducted by the US in the Marshall Islands between the mid-1940s and early 1960s. More than 20 nuclear devices were tested at Bikini Atoll and nearby Enewetak Atoll. The atoll residents were evacuated and relocated to other atolls. Little thought was given by the US Atomic Energy Commission to the potential impact of the widespread fallout contamination and to the health and ecological impacts beyond the formally designated boundary of the test. Residual radioactivity remains today in the area of the explosions. Populations of the Marshall Islands that received significant exposure to radionuclides have a much greater risk of developing cancer, especially leukaemia and thyroid cancer. The male population's lung cancer mortality on the Marshall Islands is four times higher than the overall United States rates, and the oral cancer rates are ten times higher. For decades after the testing, Marshallese women had miscarriages, giving birth to "jelly-babies", as Jetñil-Kijiner calls them in one of her poems, "History project":

> I read first-hand accounts
> of what we call
> jelly-babies
> tiny beings with no bones
> skin-red as tomatoes
> the miscarriages gone unspoken
> the broken translations
> *I never told my husband*
> *I thought it was my fault*
> (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, p. 20)

The indentation of the two lines in italics marks the passage from the poet's narrative to the confessed fears of the women she is narrating about, in free direct speech.

As Jetñil-Kijiner's experience shows, poetry has entered the world of environmental global politics and is used in the Pacific area as an instrument to make environmental issues authentic, visible, and tangible through the power of imagination. As Martha Nussbaum explains in *Poetic Justice*,

> [t]he literary imagination is a part of public rationality […]. In fact, I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own. (Nussbaum 1995, p. xvi)

Nussbaum is inspired by "a Kantianism modified so as to give the emotions a carefully demarcated cognitive role" (Nussbaum 1995, p. xvi). Hence, to her

> [g]ood literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation. (Nussbaum 1995, pp. 5-6)

The performance poetry of Jetñil-Kijiner and the other Pacific Islander poets that will be presented in the next section is, in fact, aimed to promote identification in politicians and in the global community as a whole, to share an experience that hit them or their families personally, and to claim their existence as Pacific Islanders in their own terms.

4. From Pacific environmental performance poetry to transpacific ecopoetics

As Sahra Vang Nguyen explains, after Jetñil-Kijiner's successful experience it became clear that spoken word poetry could have a big emotional impact on climate change conferences and should be included in subsequent events. This type of performances had the power to "foster cognitive processes that trigger relational and behavioural changes towards sustainability"—(Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 1). An international contest for environmental poets was therefore set up with the help of the Marshallese poet and an organisation called Global Call for Climate Action (GCCA) "to uncover some of the world's most passionate Spoken Word artists who want to create poetry that aims to change the world" (Vang Nguyen 2015). Four Pacific Islanders and spoken word poets were selected from the contest to perform at COP 21 in Paris in 2015. The aim of their performances was to make Pacific Islands visible and tangible, transform their inhabitants from abstractions into real people who are experiencing the effects of climate change first-hand, and remind everybody that what is happening in the Pacific is just the first step of a global disaster that sooner or later will affect the whole world if measures are not taken.

After being announced in November, the four winners of the contest – Terisa Siagatonu, Meta Sarmiento, Isabella Avila Borgeson, and Eunice Andrada – performed at the Paris United Nations conference that took place

between 30 November and 11 December 2015. They not only attended the official sessions of the convention, but were also involved in numerous events, meetings, ceremonies, parties, and gatherings. Their reactions were collected by Sahra Vang Nguyen for NBC News. Siagatonu, a Samoan American poet, educator, and community leader[9] now living in the Bay Area, said she was disheartened by the reality that the countries most impacted by climate change were often invisible in political spaces, and advocated the active participation of the global community in facing the climate crisis (Vang Nguyen 2015). Siagatonu had already performed in many important venues, including the White House, and received President Obama's Champion of Change Award in 2012 for her activism as a "spoken word poet/organizer in her Pacific Islander community" (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.).

Sarmiento, a Guam-born Filipino rapper, poet, speaker, and educator living in Denver, Colorado, underlined the spoken word artists' capacity to convey complex phenomena in a direct, engaging, and understandable way: "Many people are uninspired by political rhetoric, numb to all the scientific or political jargon […]. I think spoken word artists have the ability to take ideas that are difficult to understand and present them in compelling rhetoric" (Vang Nguyen 2015). He also recounted how climate change is having an adverse effect on people's physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

Filipina-American Isabella Avila Borgeson drew a picture of the consequences of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest storms recorded in history, which hit her mother's hometown, Tanauan, in the Philippines (Vang Nguyen 2015). Finally, the youngest contest winner, eighteen-year-old Filipina poet, educator, and cultural worker Eunice Andrada, who now lives in Australia, praised the resilience of the Filipino spirit in facing Typhoon Haiyan and underlined that their presence at the conference was aimed "to bridge the gap between climate experts and the rest of us, who experience the effects of climate change in our daily lives" (Vang Nguyen 2015). The four poets claimed their belief in spoken word poetry as a powerful tool in the conversations around climate change.

Indeed, the choice of four poets with a "multiplicity of belonging" – to use a definition coined by Kempf, van Meijl and Hermann (2014, p. 14) – seems to represent the current condition of most Pacific islanders characterised by movement in any possible meaning (mobility, travel, migration, diaspora, transnationalism) and by a web of multiple spatial/social relationships and cultural identifications. Even though it is particularly common in this region, such situation is also connected to the contemporary 'liquid' global world and has led many scholars to endorse a critique of static identity models in

[9] This and the following descriptions of each poet are taken and adapted from the home page of their official websites (see *Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.; *Meta Sarmiento* n.d.; *Eunice Andrada* n.d.). This is how they introduce themselves to the public. Isabella Avila Borgeson does not have a website but is nevertheless active on social media.

anthropology (Kempf *et al.* 2014, p. 2). The four poets' origin from a region affected by serious ecological problems like the Pacific Rim (the Philippines, Samoa and Guam), their migration elsewhere (Andrada to Australia, the others to the USA), their environmental militancy, and their tight bond with the ocean despite its present dangers for humans like tsunamis or sea-level rise: all these factors seem to enact Rob Wilson's idea of a "transpacific ecopoetics" (Wilson 2019-2020), i.e. a vision of the ocean as a space of ecological solidarity (not of competition and geo-territorial struggle, as for western powers). Wilson reminds us that the ocean constitutes 97% of the earth's water and that "[e]very breath we take is possible because of the life-filled life-giving sea; oxygen is generated there, carbon dioxide absorbed" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 276). For this reason, he continues, humans should see themselves as "oceanic citizens as much as earth-dwellers connected in a Gaia-like wholeness" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 261) and create a planetary solidarity in a "global environment" or, borrowing the definition from Masao Miyoshi's *Trespasses*, a "planet-based totality" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 262). In Wilson's view, the ocean needs to figure in a "more worlded vision" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 262):

> we 'surf' in a transoceanic cyberspace of global interconnection. Increasingly dematerialized as such cyberspace beings, we exist on the verge of 'forgetting the [material] sea' as a site of co-belonging, resistance, and co-history. (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 263)

The above-mentioned poets' lives and activist engagement, therefore, represent not only an emblem of connectivity between all the people of the Pacific Rim who were once united rather than separated by the ocean and share a past of colonialism and exploitation by the western imperial powers; their commitment to the environment through artistic expressions made available to a large global public thanks to digital multimodality is also a work that is carried out for the earth and its inhabitants, an example to be followed outside the Pacific context. As Otto Heim remarks, we should all start "imagining and concretising new modes of connectivity and ways of being and working together at a time when our planetary interconnectedness becomes more obvious every day" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 145). To do this, it is also necessary to reconceptualise public institutional spaces so as to make them "answearable to the places they represent and open to cross-cultural engagement" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 143). Referring to Teresia Teaiwa's analysis of literary engagement in patriotic literature from post-coup(s) Fiji, Heim underlines the necessity to open institutional spaces to "creative disturbance" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 145), the same disturbance Nussbaum (1995) considers as an attribute of good literature. Creative disturbance is exactly what these poets bring into the major institutional venues to urge their environmental engagement.

5. Terisa Siagatonu's and Eunice Andrada's Pacific environmental performance poetry

This section will analyse some poems of two of the above-mentioned contest-winning poet-performers: Terisa Siagatonu and Eunice Andrada. The reason for this choice is this article's main concern with the poetic text as an oral or written literary and activist expression. Isabella Avila Borgeson is mostly active only as a performer (in presence or video) and Meta Sarmiento as a musician and rapper, so their (basically oral) texts pertain more to performative arts than literature and would require a different critical approach. Siagatonu's and Andrada's poems, on the contrary, have been included in online poetry archives such as Poetry Foundation and Red Room Poetry,[10] and some of them have been uploaded to their websites. Andrada has also published two printed collections of poetry, *Flood Damages* (2018) and *Take Care* (2021). Their production is therefore aligned with that of Kathy Jetñil Kijiner, the first poet-performer discussed in this article and pioneer of this kind of 'hybrid' genre.

One of the best-known poems of Terisa Siagatonu, "Atlas", expresses the forceful will to change perspective on the Pacific: from the western external viewpoint to a Pacific internal one. Siagatonu denounces the butchering of the ocean made by western imperial powers, describes the misleading representation of the Pacific in cartography (past and present), and underlines the strong spiritual and material bond of Pacific islanders with the ocean and water, indirectly conveying Hau'ofa's vision of Oceania:

> To the human eye,
> every map centers all the land masses on Earth
> creating the illusion
> that water can handle the butchering
> and be pushed to the edges
> of the world.
> As if the Pacific Ocean isn't the largest body
> living today, beating the loudest heart,
> the reason why land has a pulse in the first place.
> […]
> When people ask me where I'm from,
> they don't believe me when I say water.
> (Siagatonu 2023)

Siagatonu stresses the function of the ocean as a major source of oxygen for the earth and, consequently, fundamental for the existence of all living beings, equating the destiny of western people with that of non-western people, humans with non-humans. She highlights the interconnectedness of life on our

[10] For Siagatonu's poems, see Poetry Foundation (2023); for Andrada's poetry, see Red Room Poetry (2023).

planet, promoting the values advocated in Wilson (2019-2020): a planetary solidarity in a "global environment" and a "more worlded" vision of the ocean.

However, humans must live on the land, and the Samoan soil is being taken away by the sea-level rise resulting from global warming caused by the 'First-World' industrial countries, the same imperial powers that once colonised and exploited the Pacific islands. Siagatonu vocally laments her ambiguous position of Samoan and American (she belongs to Eastern Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the US, like Guam), defining herself "blade and blood", executioner and victim at the same time:

> a hyphen of a woman:
> a Samoan-American that carries the weight of both
> colonizer and colonized,
> both blade and blood.
> (Siagatonu 2023)

The poet criticises the representation of American Samoa on the official maps, which seem to emphasise its geo-political irrelevance apart from being a tourist attraction and a US military basis. She recalls the image of the archipelago as a projection of western desires: the site of "exotic women, exotic fruit and exotic beaches" (Siagatonu 20023). She also compares the destiny of colonisers and colonised in the 'global environment', both bound to a fatal end caused by the environmental crisis that is affecting the ecosystem of the whole planet: drought in California and sea level rise in Samoa, with the consequent threat of migration:

> California, a state of emergency away from having the drought
> rid it of all its water.
> Samoa, a state of emergency away from becoming a saltwater cemetery
> if the sea level doesn't stop rising.
> […]
> What does it mean to belong to something that isn't sinking?
> What does it mean to belong to what is causing the flood?
> (Siagatonu 2023)

The same concerns appear in "For Us", where Siagatonu attacks the marginality imposed on the Pacific Ocean by western rhetoric and imperialism, and, again, underlines its vital importance for the entire planet. In the first stanza, she affirms: "upon the survival of the Pacific / depends the survival of the world" (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.).

The poem is a long list of claims and requests for reclamation and compensation. The preposition *for* in the title "For Us" means 'in favour of us' and indicates the beneficiary of the requests: Samoans or Pacific islanders in general. Throughout the poem, however, the repetition of *for* illustrates the causes and justifies the reasons for the demands. It is a sheet of charges, particularly effective when acted orally and aiming at obtaining: "nothing less

/ than our due" (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.). Images of violence are associated with colonialism: Oceania was "sliced in half" and "fractured", and the Samoan islands were "severed". The evils that affected the Pacific islands throughout history are enlisted, as if the author wished to exorcise them and auspicated a different future in which Samoa is united again, Guam and Hawai'i are demilitarised, the Marshall Islands are "nuclear waste free", the names of Pacific islanders are not misspelt, and the right pronunciation is learnt in respect for their ancestors.

> For my severed island,
> once belonging to itself
> for my chest, where Samoa is whole always
> where Guahan[11] is demilitarized finally
> Hawai'i too. Northern Mariana Islands too
> where the Marshall Islands is nuclear waste free.
> […]
> For every misspelled / mispronounced attempt
> at our family heirlooms.
> (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.)

The poem is accompanied by a colourful picture, a collage of photographs, drawings, and paintings showing Siagatonu proudly sitting in the middle, on a mat floating on the sea. She is dressed in traditional Indigenous attire, like a goddess, with sparks coming out of her head: a figure of agency and power. In the background, the symbols of her culture: a stylised Indigenous sailing boat surrounded by traditional designs, the lavish nature of a tropical island, and a native hut. Altogether, it appears as a post-modern reversal of the typical representation of the newly discovered continent (America) in official cartography, where the image of a sleepy, defenceless, naked woman is generally 'woken up' by the arrival of a male western explorer, who seems to bring her to life by possessing and dominating her (a good example is Johannes Stradanus' *The Discovery of America*, c. 1587-1589).

Eunice Andrada has also performed her works on diverse international stages, including the Sydney Opera House and the Parliament House of New South Wales. She has been awarded numerous prizes, including the Australian Poetry and NAHR Eco-Poetry Fellowship (2018) for her work in eco-poetics. In 2020, she served as editor of *Writing Water: Rain, River, Reef*, an anthology released through the Red Room Poetry archive. Her poems revolve around themes such as dispossession, trauma, gender inequality and abuse, racial discrimination, and the violated female body. Andrada describes her work as "writing from the body", i.e. seeing things from her own point of view: that of a coloured woman, an immigrant, and a victim of violence. "Writing from the body" also means using her writing to gain an understanding of her experiences

[11] One of the possible spellings of Guam.

and how these have influenced her life and her gender. In an interview, she affirmed:

> One of the urgent reasons I write is to reclaim the power from which people like me – women of colour, survivors of violence, immigrants, fetishised bodies, etc. – have been dispossessed. When I write from the body, I try to hold a mirror not only to myself, but to the reader and the world, too. (Tan 2020)

Andrada's environmental poetry is connected to and interwoven with the other threads of her poetics for her equation between human and non-human exploited categories (women and the earth) and the exploration of trauma resulting from violence and dispossession (of colonised, immigrants, coloured women, natural resources). Her work could be seen as an example of ecofeminism in her stigmatisation of a male-dominated, androcentric, and sexist society that has developed an anthropocentric relationship with nature. However, Andrada's belonging to a gendered, racialised, colonised 'otherness', complicates and amplifies trauma, inflecting ecofeminism – which was originally deeply ingrained in western feminism and in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, as Carolyn Merchant's seminal volume *The Death of Nature* (1983) explains – according to a postcolonial and decolonial perspective.

In "first creation",[12] two major threads intertwine: domestic violence and environmental issues. During an ordinary breakfast at home, her mother mispronounces the word *tsunami* she has heard from the news: "her mongrel tongue / birthing the word / in a new body" (Andrada 2018, p. 11). The emendation of her irritated father – "it's an alien climate" (Andrada 2018, p. 11) – is followed by a violent reaction: "when the bottom of the pan / cracks against my mother's head / […] the steel pan connects to my father's hand" (Andrada 2018, p. 12). The episode is reported in fragments from the viewpoint of a child who does not fully understand the scene in front of her but feels she is safer at school, just ten minutes away. The same struggling with words is described in "(because I am a daughter) of diaspora". Her mother, again, is not at ease with unknown terms to express out-of-ordinary phenomena, although learning a new language seems necessary to her and part of a tentative emancipation from traditional female roles:

> They convince my mother
> her voice is a selfish tide,
> claiming words that are not meant
> for her
> (Andrada 2018, p. 9)

[12] The titles of the poems in *Flood Damages* (2018) are always lowercased.

The daughter and narrating voice, on the other hand, feels she is losing her own mother tongue while living abroad:

> In the end
> our brown skin
> married to seabed.
>
> When I return to the storm
> of my islands
> with a belly full of first world
> I wrangle the language I grew up with
> […]
>
> I am above water, holding
> onto a country that drowns
> with or without me
> (Andrada 2018, p. 9)

Her inability to properly express herself at home is the first sign of alienation and dislocation, a state of 'in-betweeness' accompanied by a sense of impotence towards the climate emergency of her country. The poem is full of water-connected images – the "selfish tide" of her mother's voice, the "storm of [her] islands", a "country that drowns", and "[their] brown skin / married to seabed" – as to underline their close bond with the ocean, which is being disrupted by the climate crisis. The creative and vital power of water is turned into a destructive force.

This idea is also forcefully expressed in "Pacific Salt", where the smallness and irrelevance of her islands in the maps and geopolitical agenda are highlighted and the ocean, once the origin of life, has turned into a monster devouring civilizations and spitting out their remains ("baby teeth"). The style of Andrada in describing death by sea is crude ("there is no grace in sinking"). The poem finishes with a call for action, a plea for shaking off indifference and hypocrisy:

> perhaps the further you are
> the smaller we become
> in this spectacle of drowning
> as you watch baby teeth float to shore
> after the ocean spits out another hometown
> […]
> our pulses know the rhythm of emergencies
> just like our islands know the pacific salt
> that cradles them
> there was a time it could
> preserve us
> […]
> collect the stones from your mouth

there is no grace in sinking
[…]
let us not say there's nothing
we could have done
let this be the beginning of us
rising
(Andrada n.d.)

The unprecedented extremes of drought (lack of water) and typhoons (excess of water and wind) are described in "answer", in which the deluge of rain is transformed into a deluge of questions on climate change no one is willing to listen to:

during the crescendo of the blaze
the sky is a memory of water
elsewhere a country of rain
where water visits without
invitation

its deluge of questions
flowing back to the sea
after finding no one
who would listen
[…]
night upon night
the storm batters
the ground in demand.
(Andrada 2023a)

The verses, scattered in irregular stanzas, leave blank spaces on the page that are like suspensions slowing the rhythm down. They seem to represent the unanswered questions the poem is about.

A further ecological disaster is illustrated in "the poem begins with a breathing reef", an elegy about the dying coral reefs, which are now colourless "ivory skeletons", suffocated by plastic, unusually warm water, and the acidification of the sea. As in the previous poem, empty white spaces, here in the same line, slow the rhythm down, reproducing a breathless voice: that of the poet personifying the dying reef. The descendants of the reef (and of us humans) will not be organic but made of plastic. Again, the poet poses a question with no answer about how to undo the destructive work of humans against nature:

New cemetery blooms in the heat […]
beyond us our plastic descendants
float further than we ever
could
[…]
how to undo our industries
of
unmaking?
(Andrada 2023b)

To conclude, the rise of spoken word artists in the Pacific Rim, one of the most troubled areas of the world due to the climate emergency, is an expression of a novel faith in art and literature as effective weapons to shake public opinion and world leaders. The aim of performance poetry (in both live performances and videos on these artists' websites) is to involve – and not just instruct – politicians and civil society, an effect that underlines the contribution literary imagination can give to public rationality and the cognitive role of emotions theorised by Nussbaum (1995). Indeed, as claimed by Terisa Siagatonu, "[a]rt creates change, or at the very least, it inspires it. I think artists can teach those in power a thing or two about love, justice, and peace" (Vang Nguyen 2015).

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AMITAV GHOSH'S *JUNGLE NAMA*
Writing Beyond the Novel

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Abstract – The publication of *Jungle Nama* (2021) marks a new turn in Amitav Ghosh's poetics. The author moves from his own studies in environmental humanities to question the aesthetics of the novel and to reevaluate the vitalism of peasants' traditions, which he opposes to Western rationalism. With *Jungle Nama* the author turns to verse and myth to admonish and set an example of respect for the non-human. From an aesthetical viewpoint, Ghosh transposes the narrative from the traditional Bengali versions to the language and media of world literature and world arts. The result is what we call the Jungle Nama Project, where visual art, music, literature, philology, and drama come together to disrupt the epistemological dominance of the Western forms.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; *Jungle Nama*; environmental activism; ecosophy; myth.

1. Amitav Ghosh and deep ecology

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009) describes his ecosophy as ecological awareness and activism based on ultimate premises, be they philosophical or religious. Rooting ecological thought in such foundations is the hallmark of deep ecology. The depth of deep ecology consists in its roots, the unseen, somewhat private portion of the system, which nourishes the whole. Ecosophy is called thus because it blends some tenets of ecology – like complexity, diversity, and symbiosis – with philosophical, possibly metaphysical, premises. Everyone who develops an ecosophy will base it on different premises, according to one's culture and individual experiences; thus, ecosophy is, to an extent, flexible and grants the value of diversity even within the ecological movement. A personal ecosophy may be grounded in a religious creed, philosophical system, or even a place; Naess's own brand of ecosophy is famously called "Ecosophy T" because it was developed in a mountain hut called Tvergastein. Naess explains how the connection with that particular place shaped his ecological understanding in a long essay on the value of Place (Naess 2005, see esp. pp. 339-360). According to the author, this layered philosophical system originated thanks to a mountain hike he took as a teenager and in the wild mountains around Tvergastein, which he came to love later in his life (Rothenberg 1989, p. 2).

Amitav Ghosh has never described himself as a deep ecologist, and yet his commitment to environmental issues and to the assessment of the individual identity within the environment is a perfect example of ecosophy. As with Arne Naess, Ghosh's brand of ecosophy is rooted in a place – the Sundarbans. His environmental activism began when he wrote *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Indeed, one could define Ghosh's environmental philosophy as "Ecosophy S", after the Sundarbans. Ghosh visited the lagoon as a child thanks to an uncle of his who was a headmaster and the administrator of Sir Hamilton's foundation (Vescovi 2009). When he set out to write the novel, he visited the place again, staying with fishermen and villagers. He also sought the help of an anthropologist, Annu Jalais, then a PhD student, who would later become a major authority on the archipelago. Ghosh pays his debt to her in the acknowledgements of the novel and by dedicating to her his *Jungle Nama* years later. Possibly the anthropologist of French origin has also inspired the character of Paulette in the *Ibis* trilogy.

Ecosophy leads in two different directions: self-analysis to discover one's place in the cosmos, and activism to promote a more sustainable lifestyle (Rothenberg 1989, p. 4). While Arne Naess developed an ethic from his ecosophy, Ghosh has planned an aesthetic, which is likewise a basis for his activism. Both Naess and Ghosh believe that the human/nature dichotomy should be overcome as the boundary between humans and non-humans is an artificial construct. In *The Great Derangement* (2016) and in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh disputes the unethical idea that the Earth is there to be exploited and the epistemological underlying tenet that the non-human world is inert, ontologically inferior to human life, devoid of agency and communicative power.

2. Ecosophical aesthetics

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh complains that the so-called serious novel appears inadequate to represent the non-human agency. Twin brother of rationalism, the realistic novel is mostly unable to depict whatever reality is not sanctioned by the rationalist, scientific, originally Western discourse. Ghosh wonders why it turns out so difficult for serious realistic fiction – Franco Moretti's definition (2001) – to deal with climate change. His reasoning is well known and very articulated; suffice it to recall that one possible answer to this question about the irrepresentability of climate change depends on its uniqueness. Novels, Ghosh contends, are perceived as realistic not so much because of the truth of what they describe, but because of the probability of the incidents they narrate. When they tell of an unprecedented event, they appear flawed, no matter how possible the event can be. Consider for instance a story told by the Italian war writer Mario Rigoni Stern in his memoir *Il sergente*

della neve [*The Sergeant in the Snow*] (1953). The former *alpino* recounts that after a fierce battle on the banks of the river Don, from which he came out unscathed, he found a bullet stuck on the tip of his bayonet. A narrow escape that paradoxically sounds more credible in a biography than it would in a novel. In a novel such a story could suit Ann Radcliffe or Charles Dickens, but not George Eliot or Joseph Conrad. Climate change is so unprecedented in human experience that it sounds as unlikely as the tip of a bayonet stopping a lethal bullet.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh alleges that he has never been able to utilise in his fiction an extreme weather event that he encountered in Delhi as a young man because it was so unique that it would not sound believable in a novel: "Oddly enough, no tornado has ever figured in my novels. Nor is this due to any lack of effort on my part" (Ghosh 2016, p. 20). Yet he utilises it in the essay! The Bengali author connects this rejection of unlikely events to the episteme set up by rationalist thought. The bourgeois hero of the novel is rational and mostly secular, or such is at least the implied author of realistic novels. Even deeply religious authors of realistic fiction do not rely on an interventionist god. Lucia in *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] (1827-1842) is a case in point; although Alessandro Manzoni was very pious, his novel offers diverse human explanations to the Innominato's conversion, which cast doubt on the actual value of Lucia's vow to the Virgin Mary. Novels that portray supernatural forces, Ghosh argues, are pushed to the margins of serious fiction, like gothic or sci-fi, and are therefore useless to create an environmental consciousness.

At a book launch at the University of Turin in 2016, someone asked Ghosh if he meant to write a novel that would take up the challenge of representing the climate crisis. The novelist smiled and said that he was not ready to do that because ideological literature, he claimed, is mostly of poor quality. Two years later he would publish his most experimental fictional work to date, *Gun Island*, which begins in the Sundarbans and explores the connection between climate change and migration, heavily relying on unlikely coincidences and using the Bengali myth of Manasa Devi, a sylvan deity, as a subtext. According to the myth, Manasa Devi persecutes a merchant who refuses to believe in her power pursuing him all over the world, until he gives in and recognises her divinity. Arguably Ghosh has been developing a poetic that endeavours to mirror the complexity, diversity, and symbiotic life of the Sundarbans *in primis*, and then of the whole world, by refashioning an old myth.

Gun Island's bold defiance of realistic conventions clearly testifies to Ghosh's impatience with the restraints of serious fiction both on an artistic and political level. On the artistic level, he bends the rules of statistical probability almost to a breaking point, mostly through coincidences that may happen but rarely in real life. On the political level, he indicts the epistemic tyranny of

rationalism by offering interpretations and world views that challenge the Western rationalist discourse.

In his recent book-long essay *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh points out how vitalist religions of nature have been repressed, sometimes ferociously, to impose a lifestyle that consumes and exploits natural resources regardless of their renewability. He further argues that vitalist religions are more respectful of the environment and more inclusive as they do not tend to create a hierarchy of beings, which inevitably turns out to be racist and classist.

In the past, Ghosh had put up little resistance to the secular tyranny of the probable and had included only a few uncanny events that were left without rational explanation in otherwise secular narratives. The elephant anecdote in *The Glass Palace* (2000, pp. 97-103) or Kanai's encounter with the tiger on the island of Garjontola in *The Hungry Tide* (2004, pp. 320-329) are both cases in point which involve other-than-human agencies; still they remain isolated episodes with little consequence on the respective plots.

This change in the narrative technique becomes crucial as Ghosh's ecosophical aesthetic addresses two fundamental ethical questions: how can the novelist be consistent with the intellectual and environmental campaigner? And more importantly: how to tell stories without colluding with the rationalism implied by the form of the novel? The simplest way out of the quandary would be to abandon realism and turn to fantasy (actually 're-turn' as Ghosh authored a science fiction in the 1990s). However, he does not want to sever the connection between fiction and reality, because that would push the climate crisis into the realm of some Middle-earth. On the contrary, he aims to remove constraints at the aesthetic level and emancipate realistic fiction from rationalism at the epistemological level. This emancipation will pave the way to the conception of a different *Weltanschauung*.

3. Turning to myth

Ghosh pushes his experimentation even further with *Jungle Nama*: *A Story of the Sundarban* (2021).[1] The author becomes even more radical as he decides to renounce the realistic medium and tell the story of Bon Bibi (literally 'lady of the forest'), a founding myth of the Sundarbans people. Interestingly a prose translation of Bon Bibi's legend filled a chapter in *The Hungry Tide*, which may be read as a poetical encyclopedia of the Sundarbans and would not be complete without a reference to the deity's myth. In the narrative fiction, a Bengali professional translator renders the story for an American woman he

[1] Ghosh chooses the singular Bengali form *Sundarban*, while in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* he uses the more frequent *Sundarbans*. Possibly he wants to retain the original meaning 'beautiful forest' considering the archipelago as a place or forest rather than the sum of many islands. In this essay, however, we shall follow the English norm.

loves alleging that it will be easier for her to understand the people of the Sundarbans if she knows the legend. This way of incorporating the story into the novel is typically secular. Both the goddess worshippers and the story itself are mentioned, as it were, within inverted commas and offered to the benevolent secular rationalistic gaze of world readers as an anthropological curiosity. The twists in the legend's plot and the narrative ingenuity are there to be marvelled at, but not really shared by the secular middle-class intended readership. Thus, seventeen years after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh boldly abandons the inverted commas and the realistic mode of representation and offers an 'illuminated' rendition in verse. While in *The Hungry Tide* he showcased the story of Bon Bibi, in *Jungle Nama* he endorses it. Arguably this aesthetic decision amounts to a political choice, the equivalent of a boycott campaign.

For his rendition, Ghosh adopted an English adaptation of the *dwipodi poyar*, a Bengali folk metre of twelve syllables couplets, which he had silently imitated in the chapter of *The Hungry Tide* mentioned above. Thus, he eschews traditional English metres based on feet and strives to impart to his text the rhythm of Bengali folk ballads. The position of the accents is irrelevant to this particular metre (D'Hubert 2018), and the rhymes are sometimes just assonances; however, the rhythmical cadence is granted by the absence of enjambments, the occasional caesuras, and the even number of syllables.

Dukhey's mother thus describes the magic of the metre:

> [the dwipodi poyar]
> will give your voice wings, it's the metre of wonder;
> Its cadence will strengthen your words; they'll gain in power;
> It'll work its magic by tying your thoughts together;
> Into couplets of twenty-four syllables,
> That sometimes rhyme, sometimes use half-rhymed vocables.
> (Ghosh 2021b, p. 24)

The discipline required by rhyming is itself a kind of *tapa* ('penance', 'austerity') that enhances the supplicant's claim and binds the goddess.

The story recounts the adventure of Dhona, a greedy merchant who goes into the forest of Dokkhin Rai, the tiger-demon, to collect honey and wax with a disproportionate number of boats. The demon appears to him in a dream and grants him the valuable commodities on condition that he gives up his teen-aged nephew Dukhey for his prey. Dhona accepts the deal and sails back home leaving the boy to his destiny. When Dukhey believes he is lost, he remembers that his mother told him to pray to Bon Bibi in case he was in trouble. Although frightened, he finds the right words to summon her. The goddess's brother beats Dokkhin Rai, and the boy goes home astride a crocodile laden with Bon Bibi's gifts. As he arrives, he forgives his uncle, who procures him a bride, with whom he lives happily ever after. In one of the Bengali texts, Dukhey

even marries Dhona's daughter. One interesting detail of the legend is that Bon Bibi and her brother have flown from Mecca to the Sundarbans to restrain Dokkhin Rai's power. As Annu Jalais (2010, pp. 65-108) explains in the fifth chapter of her book, Bon Bibi is venerated both by Muslims and Hindus who work in the jungle. She protects both humans and tigers. Her myth offers diversion when recounted or staged, protection when the lines are chanted in a puja, and moral guidance when meditated upon.

In his rendition, Ghosh foregrounds three details: Dhona's greed, Dukhey's discipline, and Bon Bibi's equanimity. While in the original story, Dhona decides to sacrifice his nephew in cold blood, in Ghosh's *nama*, he only accepts the deal when he is told that if he does not, his entire crew will be lost. Dhona's violence is not directed primarily at the boy but at nature. His greed initially appears harmless, but eventually turns out to be destructive. Dukhey, though not significantly wise himself, is rewarded for his piety and discipline, his wisdom consisting chiefly in knowing his limits. His mother is very particular in telling him that he must invoke Bon Bibi with the right metre. After winning her battle, Bon Bibi asks Dukhey to forgive his uncle, while she does not slay the tiger-demon, but on the contrary assigns to him a portion of the forest, where he can be king. The former anthropological curiosity has become a lesson, not in anthropology but in ecological wisdom. The *nama* exposes global readers to a different culture, a different way of writing and thinking. Here Ghosh does not expound upon the causes or effects of climate change, but brings his readers back to the point where rationalist discourse and poetical, natural discourses diverged, pointing out the necessity to think differently and heed native lore. This change of paradigm calls for a medium other than the prose of rationalism and scientific discourses. Although the myth describes Dokkhin Rai in the guise of a tiger and Bon Bibi in that of a benevolent sylvan deity, Ghosh's attention is on the agency of the non-human and the way it communicates in non-human language. The metre itself, relying on sounds and patterns rather than syntax and lexis is Ghosh's attempt at undermining Western logocentrism. Ghosh sums up the message of the myth in the closing lines of the poem:

> All you need do, is be content with what you've got;
> to be always craving more, is a demon's lot.
> A world of endless appetite is a world possessed,
> is what your munshi learned, by way of his quest.
> (Ghosh 2021b, p. 70)

The use of the term *munshi* in the last line of the poem is beguiling. The word, which means 'clerk', 'scribe', or 'translator', appears often in the *Ibis* trilogy. Arguably Ghosh is referring to himself as a translator and a student who also has learnt a lesson in his quest. It is one of the many Persian or Arabic words that Ghosh has woven into his text (Biswas 2022, p. 238), following the model

of the extant versions of Bon Bibi's myth that abound in Arabic lexis. Not only has he translated the legend into another language: he has brought Bon Bibi's wisdom to a worldwide audience and other media endowing it with a new meaning. However, the two extant versions of the legend are themselves metrical translations of former oral myths, and myths are a translation of what the land itself would say. This new version needs the discipline of a metre because it cannot expect to rely on the syntax of rational human discourse, it must reach out to something less rational and more profound than that.

Ghosh is quite explicit about this interpretation in his afterword to the poem:

> The planetary crisis has upturned a vast range of accustomed beliefs and expectations, among them many that pertain to literature and literary forms. In the Before Times, stories like this one would have been considered child-like, and thus fare for children. But today, it is increasingly clear that such stories are founded on a better understanding of the human predicament than many narratives that are considered serious and adult. (Ghosh 2021b, p. 77)

4. Multimodal *nama*

The story of Bon Bibi does not exist solely as a printed text. As the readers of *The Hungry Tide* know, bright-coloured Bon Bibi terracotta images are found throughout the Sundarbans, where they receive daily worship. Furthermore, the *Bon Bibir Johuranama* [The story of the glory of Bon Bibi] is often enacted as *jatra*, a kind of folk theatre typical of Bengal, especially in the month of January. The performance, which lasts a few hours, usually focuses on the last and most dramatic part of the story, namely that of Dukhey, which has been chosen by Ghosh, too. In the shrines scattered all over the Sundarbans, Bon Bibi is often represented sitting on a tiger together with her brother Shah Jangoli (master of the forest) and Dukhey. This is also the position that actors customarily assume at the end of the performance.

Also the text of *Jungle Nama* does not aim at the empyreal self-sufficiency of the poetical word on the white page. Ghosh's verse is 'illuminated' by the drawings of Salman Toor, a Pakistani artist based in New York. The drawings are not simply an embellishment of the printed word, but a further interpretation of the legend. A further collaboration with Ali Sethi has endowed the *nama* with a soundscape, recorded in an audiobook (Ghosh 2021c), which is not simply a reading of the couplets, but a recitation to which Ali Sethi has added background music and short refrains that highlight some moments in the narrative like a Greek chorus. One could argue that Sethi's music is to the recited text what Toor's images are to the printed one.

As if the textual avatars were not enough, *Jungle Nama* has also been transformed into a musical by Brooke O'Harra, an American freelance director

who worked with Ghosh and Sethi involving the students of Penn University, where she teaches drama (Ghosh 2022). Both the music and the text have been adapted for the stage by the authors. Ghosh brought to a world audience the myth of Bon Bibi with its translated words, translated images, and translated music and theatre. The production is available on the Internet followed by a meeting with the authors and artists.

Needless to say, commercially speaking the Jungle Nama Project is a hazardous enterprise. Ghosh is an acclaimed realistic world literature novelist; his readers are hardly the readers of narrative poems and few of them are habitual readers of graphic novels. Besides, there is never knowing how Hindu fundamentalists would take his rewriting coupled with non-traditional tableaux and his collaboration with Pakistani artists.

5. A collective enterprise

The choice of collaborators for the Jungle Nama Project deserves some consideration. Both Salman Toor and Ali Sethi are young Pakistani artists living in New York. Working with them means to bridge the Hindu and Muslim worlds, much like the legend of Bon Bibi does.

As we have seen, the story of Bon Bibi has a well-established iconographic tradition that informs Indian retellings. For some time, a children's book has been in circulation recounting the story of Bon Bibi with images that recall the *patachitra* style.[2] The volume is available in several languages, including English; it has appeared in a series called "Our Myths", which purports to "draw upon timeless stories from popular and marginal sources to gently question stereotypes and rigid notions" (Rao, Roy 2011, back cover). The book, which has gone through several reprints, is published in Chennai, quite far from Bengal and the Sundarbans, and testifies to the popularity of the myth within India.

In planning his version, Ghosh took a completely different approach. He decided to ignore Indian traditional iconography, asking Salman Toor to draw the accompanying pictures. Salman Toor is known for his portrayals of lonely queer characters in dilapidated environs. To me he is reminiscent of Edward Hopper and Ravi Varma for their strokes, mood and palette. In Toor's portraits, facial expressions are fundamental. On the contrary, no face is ever portrayed in *Jungle Nama*, probably out of respect for the Islamic tradition that forbids the representation of religious images. What remains of Toor's paintings in *Jungle Nama* is their tormented features, which have no equivalent in the traditional folk style. Besides, probably to cut costs, all the tables are in black and white. Indeed, mostly black and grey. In fact, the only white figure in the

[2] *Patachitra* (literally 'painting on cloth') is a typical folk style from Orisha and Bengal, which mostly represents mythical characters with vivid colours and black outlines.

book is Dukhey's mother, who wears a white sari to mark her widowhood and frugality. Her whiteness appears to shed light on the characters around her. It also highlights the connection between women and nature, or the role of women as preservers and interpreters of nature, which surfaces also in the legend of Manasa Devi that underlies *Gun Island* (Sengupta 2022a) and in the short story *The Living Mountain* (2022). Interestingly, in Toor's illustrations, white is also used for the eyes of wild animals, as if a deep connection existed between the widow and jungle animals. According to Sulagna Sengupta (2022b), the chiaroscuro mirrors the duality between animal and human domains. Dokkhin Ray, however, is ambivalent in that he symbolises and elicits greed (which is typically human), but is also the protector of the forest. Throughout the text, smaller images are scattered without a precise connection with any episode. In particular, two images keep surfacing – fire and birds. The former may be connected with the burning appearance of the tiger (as William Blake first suggested), but also with the destructive power of greed. Ghosh sums it up in a haiku-like couplet:

> The tiger's stripes that had danced like the flames of a fire,
> now fell still, the embers of a fading pyre.
> (Ghosh 2021b, p. 5)

Birds, on the contrary, may signal an escape, a desire to rise above the grim situation.

It is difficult to say why Ghosh decided against the traditional painting and had the legend drawn in a postmodern fashion. Arguably, however, the stylistic choice is in keeping with the political stance of the whole project. Ghosh utilises his status as world literature writer to offer visibility to a kind of alternative relationship with the environment. *Jungle Nama* is a translation that is bringing to a world audience something that would otherwise be confined to Bengali peasant classes only. A sweeping comment from Kanai, the character who translates this same legend in *The Hungry Tide*, is revealing:

> Such flaws that are in my rendition [of Bon Bibi's legend] I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight, as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible. (Ghosh 2004, p. 232)

After all, Ghosh seems to argue, it is well to point out that one is reading a translation and has no unmediated access to the original. Besides, the text with its subtle references to the *Ibis* trilogy (especially to lascars and sailing) and to *Gun Island* (especially in the words of Dukhey leaving his mother to go abroad like so many other young men) refers to Ghosh as a career author.[3] It is as if

[3] Booth (1977, p. 11) suggests the term *career author* to point to the whole oeuvre of an author as opposed to the single person or the implied author of any given text.

Lingue e Linguaggi

Jungle Nama contained much of the novelistic and essayist work of the author in a nutshell. The iconographic apparatus of *Jungle Nama* 'translates' folk iconography into the language of world art like Ghosh translates Bengali into the language of world literature – his own stylised brand of standard English. In so doing, Ghosh and Toor achieve a double goal: on the one hand, they reclaim a culture and a *Weltanschauung* that have been marginalised by the mainstream rationalistic episteme. On the other hand, they assert the necessity of revising the paradigms that regulate our relationship with the non-human sphere, starting from world literature. The translation of the legend of Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide* is locutionary in that it simply informs world readers of the existence of the legend and its importance to the people of the Sundarbans. *Jungle Nama*, on the contrary, is illocutionary in that it asserts the importance of the legend of Bon Bibi not only for the people of the Sundarbans, but for all the inhabitants of what he calls "a planet in crisis." Arguably, it is also perlocutionary in that it invites readers to reflect upon their attitude to the environment and take action.

The audiobook offers the text in yet another garb. Ali Sethi is a musician trained in Urdu classical music who has experimented with world music and has been acclaimed for his chart-topper "Pasoori", performed with Shae Gill. Sethi attended one of Amitav Ghosh's courses in creative writing and put it to profit with his novel *The Wish Maker* (2009). His musical interpretation of the audiobook keeps the cosmopolitan style of the project. The music is played with traditional percussions, like the music from the subcontinent, as well as flutes and, sometimes, slightly distorted electric guitars. He sings in several languages including Urdu, Bengali, and English. Interestingly, the lyrics are not taken verbatim from the text, but have been written ad hoc, except for some passages of a traditional Bengali folk song. During the recitation, Sethi utilises the percussions to highlight some dramatic passages and wind instruments to underline dramatic events, deftly alternating major and minor keys.

As in the case of Toor, the music emphasises the mood of the characters and creates connections between different parts of the story that might be lost in the printed text. In fact, while the silent reading of the text reminds one of a poem, the added music transforms it into a ballad with refrains and incremental repetitions, which help to highlight keywords like *leaving* (with the iambic pattern of "chaló chaló, let's go let's go"), *greed* ("more, more, more"), and *sobriety* ("daal and rice"), and the melancholy plight of the protagonist ("Dukhey Dukhey").

Sethi's music has been used to turn *Jungle Nama* into a musical. Unfortunately, budget limitations have prevented it from hitting Broadway, and the production has remained at the level of semi-professional college performance. In this avatar*, Jungle Nama* lost most of its narrative lines and was transformed into a series of dialogues. The director, Brooke O'Harra created a contamination of Oriental and Western theatre, mixing ballet to

Bharata Natyam, Western and Indian clothes. Each actor plays more than one part, regardless of the characters' gender, and some actors also play musical instruments on stage. Ali Sethi plays and sings live. One of the most interesting devices of the mise en scène is the way the tiger is performed not by one actor only, but by a group of actors who either speak in unison or in turns. Even this device sheds some light on the evanescent character of the tiger-demon, strong and powerful, and yet ethereal. On the whole, the staging is reminiscent of Peter Brook's production of the Mahabharata, with its international cast. Like Peter Brook, Ghosh, Sethi, and O'Harra have amplified a local myth to bear upon all humans. As in the case of Peter Brook, one might discuss the issue of cultural appropriation, except that Ghosh is Indian, Sethi is Pakistani and the whole myth of Bon Bibi bridges Hindu and Muslim worlds. In fact, the representation of the Sundarbans through the medium of the realist novel, as in the case of *The Hungry Tide*, is an appropriation of the magic of the Sundarbans by a Western medium, which selects and describes through prose. The Jungle Nama Project, on the contrary, does not rely only on Western media, it brings the contamination, which is the hallmark of the myth, to a planetary level.

6. Conclusion

The Jungle Nama Project testifies to Ghosh's deep ecological thought and to his commitment to the environment. The Sundarbans offer a starting point both for his ethics and aesthetics. In *The Hungry Tide*, he translated the archipelago into a novel through invented stories, library research, field observations, and the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. With *Jungle Nama*, he abandons the anthropological gaze and becomes an activist. The whole project is a way to raise public awareness on the limits of the Western episteme, rationalism, and reductionism, promoting the values of those civilisations that stand closest to natural processes and attune their lives to the rhythms and demands of the Earth. Experience has taught him the greatest respect for this kind of knowledge.

While Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* was a cultural endeavour driven by aesthetic motives aimed at sharing the beauty and wisdom of the Indian poem with his audience, Ghosh's project is an example of cultural activism. The story of the glory of Bon Bibi is important not only for its beauty, but for the values that it upholds and the relationship between humans and non-humans that it fosters. While Brooks translated the Mahabharata into the semiotic system he knew best – that of twentieth-century English theatre – Ghosh has gone out of his way to experiment with new fashions to translate the myth so that it may reach the widest possible audience: verse writing, images, music, theatre. Unable to draw or compose music himself, he has sought out collaborators who

could help him in his undertaking, keeping the South-Asian core and adding layers of meaning that would make it understandable the world over.

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WORLD BANK LANGUAGE AND NEOLIBERAL GLOBAL CAPITALISM IN MOHSIN HAMID'S AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S 'LITERARY PROVOCATIONS'

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Abstract – According to Amitava Kumar, editor of the volume *World Bank Literature* (2002), the eponymous term is meant to be a 'provocation' rather than a 'distinct referent': the contributors are a mix of economists and humanities scholars who raise questions about the role of literary narratives in exposing the contradictions of what is publicly promoted and what is materially practiced by the World Bank and other international financial institutions in developing countries. After elaborating on the relationship between the World Bank and Indian society and culture, and on a possible engagement of postcolonial studies with the economic and political texts of multinational corporations, I consider two acclaimed novels, Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), focusing on the way they contribute to shaping counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in both constructing and reconstructing our understanding of global economic processes. Soon after the release of *The White Tiger*, Adiga declared that "provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature", and we understand this from the way he traces the transformation of the novel's main character, Balram, his rise from rags to riches like the characters represented in official success stories of Rising Asia. However, the process of transformation exposes what is buried in the hegemonic discourse: violence and crime. While narrating his alleged success story in the form of a self-help book, Hamid's unnamed character embodies a biting satire of the formation of neoliberal subjectivity. In both novels, I analyse how literary provocation is conveyed through the subversion and re-discussion of the neoliberal entrepreneur within the rhetoric of global capitalism.

Keywords: World Bank; Mohsin Hamid; Aravind Adiga; rising Asia entrepreneurs; literary provocation.

1. The World Bank, postcolonial studies, and India

In the introduction to his edited book *World Bank Literature* (2002), Indian writer and journalist Amitava Kumar sustains that the eponymous term is meant to be a 'provocation' rather than a 'distinct referent': it is a term that is designed to invite inquiry into globalisation, the economy, and literature. The contributors are an eclectic mix of economists and humanities scholars who raise questions about the role of literary narratives in exposing the contradictions of what is publicly promoted and what is materially practiced

by the World Bank and other international financial institutions in developing countries.

The World Bank is taken as an agent and as a metaphor that helps us concretise the wider context of global capitalism. As Pizer writes in his review of the book,

> [w]hile a plethora of works on the literature of the Southern Hemisphere, where globalization has had its most egregious effects, elucidate the resistance of the 'subaltern' in fiction, art, and music to rapacious international capitalism and its national and local agents, the worldwide but usually American based firms and institutions themselves are rarely subject to a critical reading by humanities scholars. (Pizer 2005, p. 330)

Kumar hopes for "a new and balanced engagement of postcolonial studies with the social, economic, and political texts of the global agencies and multinational corporations contested by many different actors today" (Kumar 2002, p. 10). He believes that literature cannot be sealed from the issues of economics and activism and pushes the issue forward making a truly provocative question: "Can World Bank Literature be a new name for postcolonial studies?" (Kumar 2002, p. 11) The provocation consists in inviting, or better challenging, scholars of postcolonial studies and writers to fully engage in the New Economic Policies that have invested the former colonies of the European empires after Independence. He mainly refers to Asia, and India in particular, which stands as the World Bank's single largest borrower since its institution.

As a kind of reverse operation, which seems to combine and complement Kumar's cultural project, stands the 2007 "Manifesto for a Post-Colonial International Business and Management Studies", whose subtitle is "A Provocation". It makes a call to scholars in international management and business studies to embrace postcolonial theory and allow it to provide an interrogation of the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and institutional resources currently dominating the field. The provocation regards the odd couple business/postcolonial studies, since they have always been considered worlds apart without possibilities for a dialogue. The authors affirm that international management and business studies (IMBS) have ignored, with a few very notable exceptions, the field of postcolonial theory (PCT), whereas this same theory "has wrought a profound effect on the academic endeavours of literary studies, history, anthropology and other humanities disciplines" (Westwood, Gavin 2007, p. 247). Their intention "is not to 'insert' a post-colonial sensitivity into IMBS […], capable of being kept at the margins as a 'perspective'; rather, it is to mobilize the theoretical and political resources of PCT so as to bring about a significant reconfiguration of the field (Westwood, Gavin 2007, p. 247). For example, as the North/South divide is radically understudied in IMBS, PCT would insist on rectifying such neglect and

analysing the consequences of that divide both for businesses and organisations.

The authors recognise the importance of the study of inequalities, neoliberal reforms, and developmental projects within the relationship between postcolonial countries and the former imperial nations, focusing on the consequences of global policies on local economies and local workers in terms of growth, debt, and land dispossession. Amitava Kumar shares this research approach and has collected writings that range from studies on globalisation and poverty to the role of IMF and the World Bank in women's economic resistance in West Africa and the narratives of the East Asian financial crisis, as well as the study of developing fictions regarding the presence of the 'tribal' in the new Indian writing in English. As for the essays that mostly focus on the World Bank reports and actions in developing countries, Kumar mainly refers to Asia and particularly to India. The institution has been working in the Subcontinent since the 1950s and has provided the country with over $300 billion in loans and grants. India has received financial assistance and support for the implementation of several development projects, including investments in infrastructure such as roads, ports, and power plants; programs to improve education and health services; and initiatives to promote economic growth and reduce poverty. The Bank has also supported the government's efforts to reform the power sector and improve the business climate by simplifying regulations and increasing transparency.

Edward Mason and Robert Asher, in a history of the Bank's first three decades, affirmed that India and the Bank have grown up together: "It is no exaggeration to say that India has influenced the Bank as much as the Bank has influenced India" (Mason, Asher 1973, p. 675). Catherine Caufield, writing in the mid-1990s, remarked of the then half-century that the Bank and India had travelled together: "As greater and greater sums of money passed between them, the Bank succeeded in putting its imprint on India, but India's imprint on the Bank is just as deep" (Caufield 1996, p. 23).

Overall, the World Bank's engagement with India has helped to improve the living standards of its people. Yet, in the course of time, the World Bank and IMF's programmes have faced harsh criticism, including concerns about the environmental and social impact of some projects, and the bank's accountability and transparency. In 1993, Michel Chossudovsky wrote that India was under IMF rule:

> Indirect rule in India has a long history: the Rajputs and princely states had a fair degree of autonomy in relation to the British colonial government. In contrast, under the IMF-World Bank tutelage, the union minister of finance reports directly to 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC, bypassing the parliament and the democratic process (Chossudovsky 1993, p. 385).

Such an ironic consideration found evidence in the consequences deriving from the liberalisation of labour market sponsored by the Indian government and the international financial institutions, which tended to "reinforce despotic social relations thereby providing, in practice, greater legitimacy to caste exploitation, semi-slavery and child labour" (Chossudovsky 1993, p. 386).

In the last decades, there have been increasing protests, civil battles, and radical actions by non-profit organisations and political groups for the safeguard of local economies, of peasants and farmers facing many difficulties with loans, and against the construction of dams and factories financed by IMF and the World Bank. Let us only think of the anti-dam group Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), which saw the activist Medha Patkar and writer Arundhati Roy and others in the process of bringing attention to the ecological devastation caused by the project of the dam building along the Narmada River. Arundhati Roy wrote *The Greater Common Good* and *The Cost of Living* about those issues, and in 1999 she commented on the World Bank loans in these terms: "India is in a situation today where it pays back more money to the Bank in interest and repayment instalments that it receives from it. We are forced to incur new debts in order to be able to repay our old ones" (Roy 1999b, p. 29). In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide,* the low-caste character Velutha perceives his environment and his river in the Sundarbans as something that significantly changes over time, eventually smelling of "shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans" (Ghosh 2004, p. 13).

The question of debt and loans has penetrated Indian society and culture due to the still ongoing relationship between India and the World Bank supported by current Prime Minister Modi and symbolised by the fact that on 3 May 2023, the institution selected 'corporate czar' Ajay Banga, the former Mastercard CEO, as its first Indian-origin President. In October 2022, former President Malpass had praised India for its technological achievement and extended digitisation. Prime Minister Modi said, citing the World Bank, that India has become a leader in ensuring social security through digitisation after he launched 75 Digital Banking Units (DBUs) across 75 districts in the country: "Even the most successful people in the field of technology, the experts of the tech world are appreciating this system in India. They too are amazed by its success" (Sabarwal 2022). At a World Bank event in April 2023, Modi emphasised that global institutions have an important role to play in encouraging countries across the world. Referring to the World Bank Group's proposed increase in climate finance from 26% to 35%, he said that "[a]dequate financing methods need to be worked out for behavioural initiatives too. A show of support by the World Bank towards behavioural initiatives such as Mission LiFE will have a multiplier effect" (Mohan 2023). Under the event title "Making it Personal. How Behavioural Change Can Tackle Climate Change", Modi affirmed the position of India within the institution as no longer a borrower country with a high debt to pay back, but as an influential

shareholder – the seventh largest shareholder in the multilateral lender – that can contribute to vital projects and actions on a global level.

The writers I consider here, Mohsin Hamid and Aravind Adiga, were respectively born in Pakistan and India, and have both experienced study and work in prestigious Western academies and international financial institutions and journals before becoming full-time writers. Their writings seem to contribute in a significant way to the corpus of World Bank literature since they have produced narratives embedded with the economic discourse of neoliberal capitalism, with its old and new lexicon, using satire and innovative stylistic features to express such a discourse and to criticise it. They also employ irony and sarcasm to narrate questions of development and technological advancement of 'Rising Asia', and to show the obscure side of that kind of rhetorical construction.

2. The language of World Bank (literature)

Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports, 1946-2012, the 2015 study conducted by Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre, seems to be quite revealing of the way a whole, autonomous vocabulary, not by chance reminiscent of the Orwellian Newspeak, is identified as belonging to the financial institution, with its phases of evolution and passages from different semantic areas.

The two scholars consider the full texts of the World Bank yearly Reports as their corpus, excluding the budgets and all financial tables. On a general consideration,

> the words most frequently used give an impression of extreme stability. Seven are near the top at any given time: three of them are nouns – *bank, loan/s*, and *development* – and four are adjectives: *fiscal* (especially frequent after 1975), *economic, financial* (alternating with *fiscal* in first or second place from the mid-1980's on) and *private*. (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 1)

After considering the adjectives too, among which *agricultural* and *rural* are the most frequent, at least until 1996, the authors conclude that

> the message is clear: the World Bank lends money for the purpose of stimulating development, notably in the rural South, and is therefore involved with loans, investments, and debts. […] yet, behind this façade of uniformity, a major metamorphosis has taken place. (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 2)

Confronting two Reports on the same country, Congo, in 1958 and in 2008, the authors notice that almost another language, in both semantics and grammar, has been used. In fact, compared with the style of the Reports of the first two

decades, that of the last twenty years "becomes much more codified, self-referential, and detached from everyday language" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 2).

Before the 1990s, the language refers to concrete actions, loans, plans, investments in infrastructure that will lead to the economic development and social well-being of the developing countries. There are mainly three types of social actors in the texts: *states* and *governments*; *companies, banks,* and *industries*; *engineers*, *technicians*, and *experts.* Moreover, "[d]evelopment proceeds in stages, and its 'take off' is triggered by the production of raw materials, the creation of infra-structures, and an agricultural sector oriented towards exports" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 3). Whereas factuality is the main feature representing the language used in the early decades, in the last twenty years there has been a shift to three new semantic clusters that have to do with finance, management and poverty reduction, and governance.

Between 1990 and 2010, the Reports saw the rise of financial language and management discourse, made up of "an acronym-obsessed language" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 6) regarding, especially, the question of poverty reduction. Poverty is no longer explained and illustrated using concrete terms, but has become 'the problem', and the nouns that define its semantic area are not *bank, cost, income* etc., but rather *focus, key, framework, approach, management, policies, programs*, all the key-steps to reduce it. The semantic cluster of *governance* "includes a series of terms which express a sense of compassion, generosity, rectitude, empathy with the world's problems" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 7). These ethical problems were almost absent in the first decades, but they have become omnipresent since the 1990s, together with nouns and adjectives like *responsible, responsibility, effort, commitment, involvement, sharing, care.*

Thus, the Bank's credo is that of "enhancing and promoting what is appropriate, equitable and sound" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). It is committed to "achieving and communicating results, creating opportunities for people in developing countries" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). There is an overall feeling of dedication and commitment: "the Bank's sense of responsibility is as admirable as its exceptional efficiency" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). The authors quote the opening sentence of the 2012 Report: "The Bank is making progress both internally and in the field, and it continues to improve the way it serves its client countries" (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). It is rather clear that there is a mixture of ethics, moral behaviour, and business (clients). The Bank suggests that business and ethics are no longer opposite terms, but that ethics is at the heart of the business world today. And this is expressed with an abstract language that lacks specificity and is perfectly inscribed within the field of today's corporate discourse.

Indian fiction in English has begun, from the early 1990s, to talk about that middle-class of Indian software writers 'wired' to the circuits of global production in the US. Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995),

Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics* (1999), Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and more recently Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* (2022), to name just a few, explore how immigration and the experience of working for multinational companies in India, Pakistan and abroad, have affected people's lives, including the controversial and problematic aspects of being suspended between different worlds, where the new world to settle in for the Asian immigrants is no longer the UK but North America, and for the upper-middle class the main sector of employment is the American corporate world of finance and information technology. Furthermore, writers and intellectuals have started to critically reflect upon the new economic configuration of the Subcontinent, from a local and global perspective, and within the linguistic framework of the World Bank's discourse.

The analysis of Hamid's and Adiga's novels allows us to observe and recognise the application of Bankspeak in different ways. It is possible to better identify the vocabulary of the first period of the Bank Reports with Hamid's novel, whereas Adiga's *White Tiger* is more connected with the recent language of finance, with new market forms and economies regarding information technology, outsourcing, digitisation. Both novels allude to and critically reconfigure one particularly important trope of neoliberal globalisation: 'Rising Asia', or the turn towards Asia as an ascendant geopolitical and economic superpower conglomerate. The authors take up the Rising Asia narratives of the recent years, developed in books and TV series by authors like, for example, Thai tycoon Vikrom Kromadit, whose best-seller and autobiography *Be a Better Man* (2019) recounts how he has become one of the most successful Asian businessmen in developing industrial areas for large-scale plans. Stories of the kind are based on an acritical optimism in the myth of ascendance for Asia. As Gui underlines, the two writers here examined, in different ways and styles, render this trope "through an artistic semblance that reiterates but also resignifies its idiom and vocabulary" (Gui 2013, p. 178). This means a "negation of an empirical – and entrepreneurial – world that is too much with us" (Gui 2013, p. 175): Adiga's and Hamid's works can be considered

> as acts of narrative renovation: key terms and concepts from neoliberalism and globalization are appropriated and resignified as the novels interweave their protagonists' development as Rising Asia entrepreneurs with devices and tropes from traditional literary genres, namely the Gothic tale (in *The White Tiger*) and the story of first love (in *How to Get Filthy Rich*). (Gui 2013, pp. 174-175)

3. Mohsin Hamid's provocative 'guide' to upward mobility

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia fuses the conventional "rags to riches story" and its predictable narrative pattern with the immediacy of the self-help book. Hamid identifies a rapidly developing, booming South Asia, with its large aspirational population, growing consumption, changing tastes, excessive capital, and seemingly endless business opportunities, as the new site of capitalist fantasies. The novel traces the rise of its main protagonist, "you", who is, just like all the other characters in the narrative, unnamed. The ambitious third child of a poor family, "you" migrates with his parents and siblings to an unspecified city – Lahore in Pakistan, maybe – in search for a better life, and climbs the economic and social ladder thanks to his water supply business through which he achieves material success. Instead of a bildungsroman narrated in third or first person that one might expect from such a story, we encounter a dramatic monologue. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator speaks directly to the reader in a tone that is by turns familiar, humorous, and insinuating. The unnamed narrator begins his narrative as follows: "Look, unless you're writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron. You read a self-help book so someone who isn't yourself can help you, that someone being the author (Hamid 2014, p. 3). Each chapter is framed as a chapter in a self-help book and organised as a logical sequence of practical steps one needs to take to become "filthy rich" (e.g., "Move to the city", "Get an Education", "Don't Fall in Love", "Work for Yourself", "Avoid Idealists", "Learn from a Master", but also "Be Prepared to Use Violence", "Befriend a Bureaucrat", "Patronize the Artists of War", "Dance with Debt", "Have an Exit Strategy"). Thus, it seems that this work cannot really help you become rich and live happily ever after because irony, sarcasm, and paradox pervade the book from the very first page and, especially in the last phases of the story, help vanishes and business problems increase.

The narrator, while not coincident with the author "Mohsin Hamid", is represented as the persona of a writer of a self-help book who is writing a novel. Thus, "you" refers both to the reader and a character in the text, and the reader is denied the safety of distance, becoming the object of satire as well. Satire is firstly addressed to the genre of self-help books, recalling and critically revising works like *Retire Rich* by P.V. Subramanyam (2019), or *The Richest Engineer* by Abhishek Kumar (2019), *I Will Teach You How to Be Rich* by Ramit Sethi (2009), *How to Be Your Financial Planner in 10 Steps* by Manish Chouhan (2013), *You Can Get Rich Too: With Goal-Based Investing* by P.V. Subramanyam and M. Pattabiraman (2016), just to name some of the most successful and recent books of the kind published in India.

Hamid's narrator is the counter-voice of that mainstream narrative and can explain what it means to become filthy rich in rising Asia, with irony and cynicism:

> We exist in a financial universe that is subject to massive gravitational pulls from the states. States tug at us. States bend us. And tirelessly, states seek to determine our orbits. You might therefore assume that the most reliable path to becoming filthy rich is to activate your faster-than-light marketing drive and leap into business nebulas as remote as possible from the state's imperial economic grip. But you would be wrong. Entrepreneurship in the barbaric wastes furthest from state power is a fraught endeavour, a constant battle, a case of kill or be killed, with little guarantee of success. (Hamid 2014, p. 140)

According to Angelia Poon,

> [t]he object of the novel's satire is the capitalist, neoliberal notion of the self that is predicated on an overweening sense of control and ultimate agency. […] Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the care and transformation of the self in order to take best advantage of a market economy. With material affluence as the goal, the means to achieving that is often seen as simply a matter of individual choice and personal will – to be entrepreneurial and enterprising, for example – rather than any advantage one might attribute to traditional indices of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, or family background. (Poon 2017, p. 141)

Hamid employs the vocabulary of factuality and concreteness belonging to the World Bank's early Reports in the description of how the protagonist has reached material affluence, revealing the city's infrastructures, the development of the urban area, the business of water supply, and the transformation of the metropolis, with its growth of wealth, but also with the widening of the rich-poor divide. As an example, the protagonist's arrival in the city is described as follows:

> Dirt streets give way to paved ones, potholes grow less frequent and soon all disappear, and the kamikaze rush of oncoming traffic vanishes, to be replaced by the enforced peace of the dual carriageway. Electricity makes its appearance, first in passing you slip below a steel parade of high voltage giants, then later in the form of wires running at bus-top eye level on either side of the road, and finally in streetlights and shop signs and glorious, magnificent billboards. Buildings go from mud to brick to concrete, then shoot up to an unimaginable four stories, even five. (Hamid 2014, p. 14)

The choice of water as the commodity with which the protagonist makes his money is not accidental given that water is symbolically significant on so many levels. In the rising Asia of the novel, unequal access to water strikingly reveals the gap between the rich and the poor. Those who can afford it buy bottled water rather than drink the sewage-contaminated water from the city's network of pipes and taps. "You" first enters this market the only way he can – by supplying fraudulent bottled water: "In your case you've set up a small business, a workhorse S in the thunderous economic herd of what bankers and policy makers call SMEs" (Hamid 2014, p. 98). As a scarce and precious

commodity, the provision of which the state is content to outsource to third-party private companies, water also stands as a potent symbolic reminder of market-based policies and the neoliberal ideology's reach:

> Becoming filthy rich requires a degree of unsqueamishness, whether in rising Asia or anywhere else. For wealth comes from capital, and capital comes from labor, and labor comes from equilibrium, from calories in chasing calories out, an inherent, in-built leanness, the leanness of biological machines that must be bent to your will with some force if you are to loosen your financial belt and, sighingly, expand. (Hamid 2014, p. 120)

The protagonist expands his business from selling bottled water of dubious quality to securing a licence as a municipal vendor of water, navigating in the process threats from competitors and a corrupt state bureaucracy, before finally leveraging on debt to scale up and dominate the water market. He admits that

> many skills, as every successful entrepreneur knows, cannot be taught at school. And where money-making is concerned, nothing compresses the time frame needed to leap from my-shit-there-until-it-rains poverty to which-of-my-toilets-shall-I-use affluence like an apprenticeship with someone who already has the angles all figured out. (Hamid 2014, p. 78)

For that last step, the protagonist's "business is quantified, digitized, and jacked into a global network of finance, [his] activities subsumed with barely a ripple in a collective mathematical pool of ever-changing current and future cash flows" (Hamid 2014, p. 183).

With each change, the unnamed protagonist is thus further removed from his fixed business and drawn deeper into a fluid, insubstantial world of financial flows and capital circulation. Hamid frequently uses the style of moral teachings that, according to Bhabha, pertains to the pedagogical aspect of neoliberal rationality and to the vocabulary of the last decades of the World Bank's Reports. It is reproduced here with the narrator's truisms and within an ironic framework. With *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Hamid's intent is to capture and reflect capitalist realities. In this regard, the text may be read as an endorsement of what Mark Fisher has termed "capitalist realism" or "a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, p. 16; emphasis in original). It is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, p. 2). In mobilising the discourse of self-help and the stylistic features of that genre, Hamid has written a novel of capitalist realism that reflects upon what it means for a postcolonial country to live in the present historical moment under the influence and support of international

financial institutions and within the framework of globalisation and neoliberalism.

4. The provocative neoliberal entrepreneur in *The White Tiger*

Soon after the release of *The White Tiger* in 2008, Aravind Adiga declared that "provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature" (Rana 2008). This is certainly true for his novel, for the way he traces the transformation of the main character, Balram Halway, his rise from rags to riches, and like Hamid's protagonist, his transformation and achievement of economic success reflecting the stories of rising Asia. However, the process of transformation exposes what is buried in the hegemonic discourse and official narratives of successful economic development in neoliberal times: violence, crime, and corruption. Halway's story embodies a biting satire of the formation of neoliberal subjectivity, and literary provocation is conveyed through the subversion and re-discussion of the Indian entrepreneur within the rhetoric of global capitalism.

Balram Haway calls his native village the Darkness, whereas Bangalore, the city, represents the Light; the story is told in the first person in the form of letters written to the Chinese Prime Minister, Mr. Jiabao, who is coming to India on an official visit. Whereas in Hamid's novel the story proceeds following a linear narrative time and we read about the unknown narrator's bad deeds and misfortunes towards the end of his story in the chapter called "Find an Exit Strategy", in *The White Tiger* the protagonist confesses his crime (he killed his master) from the very beginning:

> I could gloat that I am not just any murderer but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer. But I don't want to go on about myself. You should hear some of these Bangalore entrepreneurs – my start-up has got contract with American Express, my start-up runs the software in this hospital in London, blah blah. I hate that whole fucking Bangalore attitude, I tell you. (Adiga 2008, p. 37)

The autodiegetic narrator explicitly identifies himself as a "white tiger," i.e., a creature "that comes along only once in a generation" (Adiga 2008, p. 35), capable of breaking out of the "rooster coop" in which most of the Indian poor prefer to stay. As portrayed by Adiga, globalised India is still a place of abject poverty, but this poverty is now contextualised in finanscapes and mediascapes – recalling Arjun Appadurai's terminology (1996) – that not only create new dimensions of social inequality but also present new opportunities to reject and rise from poverty – if only to a few determined individuals, exceptional men

who stand out from the millions in their country and who cannot, or do not dare to, escape from social suffering:

> Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness. (Adiga 2008, p. 11)

> I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarth is your typical Indian village Paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measures and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties our prime Minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends! (Adiga 2008, p. 16)

Here we notice how the narrator makes use of the typical Bankspeak of the early decades: the ironic description of India's advancement under the control of international organisations reflects the programmes of development of the rural areas and its connection with the World Bank and IMF. But poverty, as Balram shows, is present everywhere, even in the 'light', in the city. You need to become a talented entrepreneur to escape from it. He addresses the Chinese Prime Minister with audacity – eye to eye as members of Asian nations that have inherited the power of the West:

> All India Radio lady announcer said, 'Mr. Jiabao wants to meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success from their own lips'. […] Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (Adiga 2008, pp. 175-176)

Irony and paradox concentrate on the contrast between the real things that India still does not have and the salvific, redeeming figure of the entrepreneur, the future of the nation:

> Apparently, Sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology. And these entrepreneurs – we entrepreneurs – have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now.
>
> You hope to learn how to make a few Chinese entrepreneurs, that why you're visiting. That made me feel good. (Adiga 2008, pp. 2-3)

> […] I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore.
>
> By telling you my life's story.

> See, when you come to Bangalore, and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window, while holding up a bootlegged copy of an American business book, wrapped carefully in cellophane and with a title like:
>
> **TEN SECRETS OF BUSINESS SUCCESS!**
>
> or
>
> **BECOME AN ENTREPRENEUR IN SEVEN EASY DAYS!**
>
> Don't waste your money on those American books. They're so *yesterday.* I am tomorrow. (Adiga 2008, p. 4)

Balram has been kept as a despised and ridiculed servant for most of his life until he murders his wealthy, westernised master and steals the money with which the latter has intended to bribe the government. With this money, Balram manages to re-invent himself as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, "*the world's centre of Technology and Outsourcing*" (Adiga 2008, p. 1). As Korte comments,

> Balram has a megalomaniac streak that makes him appear ridiculous at times. However, the attributes which he ascribes to himself at the novel's beginning – 'A Thinking Man', 'a self-taught entrepreneur', 'a man of action and change' – are justified by his actual achievements, even if the money he gained through his crime was a major catalyst for his final success. (Korte 2010/2011, p. 304)

Balram seems to perfectly adhere to the features of a new India, which Pranjal Sharma in the World Economic Forum website defines as follows:

> India has long branded itself as the world's leading outsourcing destination for global companies, particularly for those in the technology sector – but in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the time is ripe for the world's most populous country to reinvent itself. […] Provided these favourable conditions can be met, India has unmatched potential to become the world's next Silicon Valley. (Sharma 2017)

As for Bangalore, one of the cities in which the novel is set, in 2017 it was ranked as

> the most dynamic city in the world, based on factors like technology and innovation. While initially an outsourcing hub, the city has successfully moved away from this past focus, embracing entrepreneurship and emerging technologies. This has allowed it to position itself as India's tech capital. In 2018 alone, there were 153 new start-ups founded in the city. (Sharma 2017)

This is the world of Balram's movements and success, whose lexicon reflects the last evolution of Bankspeak, the passage from semantic areas of factuality and concreteness to more abstract and undefined terms:

> I love my start-up – this chandelier, and this silver laptop, and these twenty-six Toyota Qualises – but honestly, I'll get bored of it sooner or later. I'm a first-*gear* man, Mr. Premier. In the end, I'll have to sell this start-up to some other moron – *entrepreneur*, I mean – and head into a new line. I'm thinking of real estate next. You see, I am always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'. The whole world will come to Bangalore tomorrow. Just drive to the airport and count the half-built glass and-steel boxes as you pass them. Look at the names of the American companies that are building them. And when all these Americans come here, where do you think they're all going to sleep? On the road? […] The future of estate is Bangalore, Mr. Jiabao. You can join in the killing if you want – I'll help you out! (Adiga 2008, pp. 274-275)

In an interview with Vijay Rana for *The Indian Express*, Adiga explains the characteristics of the protagonist he has created:

> What I am trying to do is to expand the literary canvas to include a member of an Indian class, who is increasingly being written out not only from literature but also from Hindi film. You will rarely see a character like Balram Halwai in the films, although you will see them all around Delhi. When I was writing this book one of my aims was to provoke and even to disturb some people because I think I have a journalist's instinct, unless something disturbs some people it can't be good. (Rana 2008)

The word *entrepreneur* is over-lexicalised throughout the novel, and according to Machin and Mayr (2012) this is to give extra weight and over-emphasis to the term. Adiga makes it the key figure of neoliberal capitalist economy and the personification of all controversial aspects related to development in rising Asia:

> When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful (though probably least known) businessmen, you will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man. The century, more specifically, of the *yellow* and the *brown* man. (Adiga 2008, p. 4)

> The entrepreneur's curse. He has to watch his business all the time. (Adiga 2008, p. 5)

> The Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time. (Adiga 2008, p. 6)

> Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay. […] Calling myself Bangalore's least known success story isn't entirely true, I confess. About three years ago, when I became, briefly, a person of personal importance owing to an act of

> entrepreneurship, a poster with my face on it found its way to every post office, railway station, and police station in this country. (Adiga 2008, p. 9)

Entrepreneur and *entrepreneurship* become umbrella terms that contain everything and are not really specified: apart from the practices of ascending the financial world, those words include strategies of survival, bribery, illegal projects, together with old stereotypes and dichotomies that constitute a threat for the real economic and social progress: rich vs poor, master vs servants, Indians vs Europeans, Asia vs the West.

Adiga has chosen to narrate what lies under the image of the neoliberal Indian entrepreneur in the 21st century, and he tells such a story from the provocative point of view of an exceedingly charming, egotistical admitted murderer. The extreme provocation continues until the protagonist's final reflection:

> I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant. (Adiga 2008, p. 276)

To conclude, *The White Tiger* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* contribute to shaping counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in both constructing and reconstructing our understanding of global economic processes. Using a language that belongs to those processes and to the specificity of the Indian subcontinent, the authors contest the validity of the same development programmes and reveal the ongoing contradictions of postcolonial society under the 'rule' of multinational companies and institutions.

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CHALLENGING LANGUAGE
A Study of 'Opposition' in Five Political Essays by Arundhati Roy

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Abstract – This article analyses linguistic opposition – from sounds to single terms to entire passages – as a shaping feature of Arundhati Roy's non-fiction through the framework of opposition theory (Jeffries 2014). Building on previous studies, Jeffries takes the theory and practice of oppositeness in meaning-creation to innovative conclusions that hypothesise its key-role in human cognition, societies, and the construing work of language itself. I will concentrate on five representative political essays in Arundhati Roy's collected volume of non-fiction *My Seditious Heart* (2019), with the goal of analysing Roy's use of 'opposites' in her fiery criticism of the Indian government's development projects and neocolonial policies. I will first relate Roy's non-fiction to Jeffries' insights, then focus on some key passages in Roy's essays where oppositional structures are foregrounded, and finally draw some provisional conclusions in relation to structuralist stylistics.

Keywords: opposition theory; Arundhati Roy; *My Seditious Heart*; structuralist stylistics; political dissent.

I am, apparently, what is known
in twenty-first-century vernacular
as a 'writer-activist'. (Like a sofa bed).
(A. Roy "The Ladies Have Feelings, So … Shall We Leave It to the Experts?", 2019, p. 111)

1. Introduction

This article aims to analyse five political essays by Indian writer Arundhati Roy through the framework of opposition theory (Jeffries 2014). How does a stylistics approach help us read the language of Roy's fiery opposition to the Indian government's development projects and neocolonial policies, the target of Roy's public political dissent since the late 1980s? And how does Roy's phenomenally combative prose help us evaluate the lens that linguistics is offering us to closely read one of the core linguistic features of post/colonial writing, namely binary opposition, which, from lexical

antonymy through the stereotypical divides of colonial discourse, for nearly half a century has been the object of intense scholarly work?

The epigraph above, reporting Roy's famous reply to the attempt of diminishing her role and identity as political thinker, is an example of the way Jeffries' theory may help us look more closely at the way we construct oppositeness by triggering binary opposites, mutually exclusive terms, whereas in theory a wide gamut of possibilities is available. On the one hand, the Indian intelligentsia has used the epithet 'writer-activist' to diminish or even destroy the effectiveness of Roy's political action; on the other, Roy's has smartly responded to the dismissive appellation by comparing a 'writer-activist' to a 'sofa-bed', ironically pointing out how her thorough political commitment has been reduced to having an occasional secondary function – and even one that hardly serves its purpose – since you would rather sleep in a proper bed, i.e. rely on a proper politician, rather than on a mere 'activist', a term whose radical overtones, whose association with inordinate behaviour, is generally looked at with suspicion by public opinion (Dillet, Puri 2016, pp. 49-50).

What we also see if we read Roy's response a bit more extensively, is that she aptly employs oppositional gradation to depict this intermediate discursive terrain, proving that, as Jeffries claims, writers tend to be more subtle than politicians or ideologues in positioning themselves in sharp antagonistic situations, more able to articulate complexity (Jeffries 2014, pp. 97-109). In explaining why her public political commitment has aroused such direct attacks (because it is perceived as an invasion of the political stage where debate is reserved to professional politicians and media), Roy employs comparative structures (*what's worse*, *what's even worse*) and so enters the highly adversarial arena as through a stepped walkway:

> I've been saddled with this double-barreled appellation, this awful professional label, not because my work is political but because in my essays, which are about very contentious issues, *I take sides*. *I take a position*. I have a point of view. *What's worse*, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position, and *what's even worse*, I use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position. Now, for a writer of the twenty-first century, that's considered a pretty uncool, unsophisticated thing to do. It skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues – a breed of people that the world has learnt (quite rightly) to mistrust. I'm aware of this. *I'm all for* being circumspect. *I'm all for* discretion, prudence, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity, complexity. I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain, the tender shard of an incomplete dream. *Most of the time*. (Roy 2019, p. 112, emphasis added)

While articulating her uncompromising political position, she fully describes the more complex ground that artists and writers usually live in, being keener on observing and depicting the indefinite middle ground between extremes,

made of irreducible and unresolved nuances, but which Roy the activist and human rights defender finally leaves behind decisively to position herself on the right-wrong platform of political opposition to the Indian state that has led to large-scale catastrophes for Indian citizens and the environment. In this complex political scenario, Roy has wittingly decided to join the public protest of many Indian intellectuals and ordinary citizens – if not unanimously appreciated (Ghosh 2015, pp. 163-165) – and therein enlist her powerful imaginative force.

2. Jeffries' opposition theory

Why is it that we are keen on using binary dualities in our daily social discourse and why is it that we are often unable to see that oppositional terms partake in a gamut of variables of which our drastic actualisations are but the choice of strong terms among several intermediate possibilities? These are two key questions at the core of Jeffries' study on opposition in discourse (2014) that Roy's prose indirectly addresses and helps answer.

Often considered as a sort of "catch-all category" (Simpson 1997: 72 quoted in Jones 2002: 2) and sometimes quite arbitrarily "labelled antonyms or binaries" (Jeffries 2014, p. 1), 'opposites' are classified by Jeffries according to four main categories: 1) complementary opposites (like *black* and *white*) in which the opposite pair relates by mutual exclusivity; 2) converses (like *teacher* and *pupil*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by mutual dependence; 3) gradable opposites (like *easier than before*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by gradeability; 4) reversive or directional opposites (like *up* and *down*) in which the 'opposite pair' relates by reversibility (Jeffries 2014, pp. 19-25).

In Jeffries' framework, the textual realisations of these 'opposites' is variously triggered by four types of syntactic structures: 1) negation and related negative structures, such as *x (not y)*; *x rather than y*; 2) repetitions or parallel structures that build a relation of similarity or contrast; 3) coordination, especially contrastive conjunctions such as *but* and *yet*; 4) comparatives that typically trigger the sense of a "paradoxical co-existence of opposites" (Jeffries 2014, pp. 33-55). Thus conceived, these types of 'opposites' are defined as 'unconventional', i.e., textual realisations which we understand as opposite because we instinctively associate them to related 'conventional opposites', which are better known because more commonly used. For instance, the *warm/chilly* opposition makes sense because we automatically relate it to the *hot/cold* conventional 'opposite pair' of which *warm/chilly* is a non-conventional variation.

Jeffries had already fully conceptualised her framework about 'opposites' in *Meaning in English* (1998), where she discussed 'opposites' and 'antonyms' as follows:

> The word 'antonymy' is often used as the opposite of synonymity but we should be aware that […] 'real' opposites would have nothing in common at all. This would not be a very close or useful relationship as a few examples can show. If we try to choose words that are as different as possible from words such as *cat*, *sing*, *palpitation*, *ringworm*, *gelatine*, we find ourselves thinking of words like *porcupine*, for *sing*, or *meditate* for *gelatine*. The answers are disparate – we do not agree on this kind of opposition – it is not culturally important and is therefore not enshrined in our vocabulary. What, then is opposition as found in vocabularies? Opposition is essentially a special kind of partial synonymity. Two words are partial synonyms when they share many of their components of meaning. For example, *pour* and *spill* share features like **movement of liquid + change of location + from solid container**, but they differ in one important cultural respect: *pour* is an intentional action whereas *spill* is unintentional. (Jeffries 1998, pp. 102-103)[1]

In Jeffries' theorisation, however, there seems to be an unresolved contradiction stemming from previous studies of 'opposites', especially D.A. Cruse's *Lexical Semantics* (1986) and John Lyon's *Semantics* (1977), which hypothesise a cognitive and physiological reason why humans readily use mutually exclusive complementary opposites rather than their intermediate near synonyms (Jeffries 2014, pp. 14-19). While recurrently pointing out that 'opposites' constructs are context-based, i.e. reflective of a community's or an individual's mindset, the contrary hypothesis is as recurrently made that 'opposites' in language may reflect both the binary structure of language in general as well as that of human cognition, so that the study of opposition could well lead to the discovery of universal laws.

It may well be – Jeffries proposes – that we innately rely on conventional antonymic pairs that are fixed in our 'knowledge of the language' and that activate the meaning of 'on-off opposites' whenever we use or need to decode them. Key to this hypothesis is a structuralist view of language that sees conventional opposite pairs as belonging to the stable core of the language, the *langue*, and the created non-conventional opposites as pertaining to usage, the *parole*. Oppositeness – Jeffries hypothesises – could

[1] According to Steven Jones, on the other hand, antonyms are "effectively a special kind of co-hyponyms. For example, *female* and *male* are both adjectives (or nouns), which define gender; *bad* and *good* are both quality-measuring attributes of a given concept, and so on. The word which has a maximum opposition with *happy* is not *unhappy* or sad (for they are both adjectives and they both describe one's feelings); rather, it would be a word such as *cutlery*, which shares nothing in common with happy. By definition, antonyms have lots in common" (Jones 2002, p. 7).

be one more core process by which we construe the world through language besides those already theorised (see, for instance, Halliday, Matthiessen 2006), based on our supposed tendency to read reality through universal pairs of opposites.

Moreover, Jeffries adds the important observation that teachers and teaching materials typically emphasise polar extremes even though they could do otherwise and teach 'opposites' as partaking in a gamut of gradations:

> At a fairly young age, children in English-speaking societies are introduced to opposites, usually via picture books or early books with barely more than one sentence on a page. […] The first conclusion we can draw from this explicit teaching of opposites is that they are clearly conventional, rather than absolute relationships, if they need to be taught so explicitly. But perhaps a more interesting aspect of this introduction of young people to opposites is that although most of the opposites taught to children are the gradable kind (*hot-cold*, *tall-short*, etc.), the emphasis from the adults teaching them is on the extremes, as though they were *really* complementaries. It is only later, when the important lesson of oppositeness has been learned that children discover that *hot* and *cold* are connected through a range of intermediate temperatures and their terminology (*warm*, *cool*, *tepid*, etc.), and that *tall* and *short* are only relative terms. By this time the 'norm' for opposites, that is that the stereotypical opposite is a complementary, has been established in the young person's worldview. […] this notion of the stereotypical opposite as a complementary is deeply entrenched in many aspects of Western society and it has very serious repercussions for us all. (Jeffries 2014, p. 27)

That this has serious consequences, Jeffries explains by way of an anecdote she uses as an example of the way 'opposites' work (Jeffries 1998, p. 105) and as the reason why she has focused more extensively on 'opposition in discourse' (Jeffries 2014, pp. 2-4). In the 1983 British election campaign, the Conservative Party chose a political advertisement showing a picture of a business-looking young man with the caption "Labour says he is black. Tory says he is British". The slogan made Jeffries realise how the syntactical frame emphasising the opposition of the two political parties triggered the false opposition between being British and being dark-skinned. On the one hand, this obliged the Tories to withdraw the advertisement even though, according to Jeffries, the slogan per se had no intention of being prejudiced. On the other hand, she points out, it induced British novelist Caryl Phillips to read the message from the perspective of a "black man on the left of the political spectrum" (Jeffries 2014, p. 4) and to consider it as racialist. For Jeffries, such opposites are an "example of what Grice (1975) calls a conventional implicature and Simpson (1993) […] calls pragmatic presupposition" (Jeffries 2014, p. 3). However, I believe that if one read *British* and *black* as partial synonyms, it would be much easier to avoid prejudice and injustice,

and that it is not enough to point at a problem, notice that it originates in an objective error, study it thoroughly to the extreme consequences, without finally correcting it. In this respect, it is indeed quite disappointing to see that in the pages of the book devoted to a survey of 'opposition in the history of ideas', from philosophy to science to language (Jeffries 2014, pp. 7-19), there is no mention of the research on 'colonial discourse' in applied linguistics (Pennycook 1998) or the racialist turn of binaries that has historically shaped British societies.

Building on these theoretical premises, I will try to assess whether Arundhati 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. To this aim, I will analyse five political essays taken from *My Seditious Heart* (2019). I first chose "The Greater Common Good" because the real story of Indian people's heroic resistance to the Indian state has been foundational for Roy's political thinking and writing; I then chose the other four texts because they introduce new themes while developing aspects of the first one; as importantly, the five texts together compose a kind of creative-factual narrative, which fits one of the author's main purposes for writing political essays: to test her linguistic ability to make political and technical issues as effectively involving as those she deals with in her fiction.

3. Five essays in action

Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart* is a huge volume collecting the political essays that Roy either singly published or delivered as public speeches in India and the United States between 1998 and 2018. Using her own definition for both her literary and non-fiction work, the volume's overall topic is "the dialectic between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they're engaged in" (Roy 2019, p. 187). More specifically, it is about Roy's struggle against the nationalistic politics and propaganda that the Indian government has adopted since at least the early 1990s, when it initiated an uncontrolled neoliberal economy along with massive development projects. These mainly consisted in a network of thousands dams of several sizes which upset the environment and dispossessed millions of people, the majority of whom the poorest minorities of the country, but suited India's new image of world superpower and complied with neocolonial requests, particularly the US corporate market policies with their extended interests in India. This situation, Roy recurrently declares, is responsible for altering the *meaning* of life through a propagandistic language that persuades a democratic country to support a 'fascist' government and its ineffective left-wing opposition. In this respect, the agenda at core of these essays is: 1) to

lay bare the ruling propaganda, "to reclaim language […] words being deployed to mean the opposite of what they really meant" (Roy 2019, p. xix); 2) to articulate a veritable and more complex view of facts; 3) to change people's mindset and redirect political consent.

To try and closely follow Roy's enterprise, I chose five representative essays, on the whole covering about 150 pages, whose energetic dissent is indicated in their very titles, where homophony produces a double meaning that either opposes the primary sense or complicates it, and a triggering dynamic that sets words in a motion toward a goal, as if the essays were on a march. The "Foreword", with its near homophone *forward*, suggests that action animates this book from the very outset. The pun on *end* in the essay "The End of Imagination" reverses the negative meaning of *end* as *death* to rather indicate an aim, a purpose. The comparative *greater* in the title of the third essay "The Greater Common Good" triggers a double meaning at the moment when we come to understand that *greater* refers to both the lie that the state tells its citizens to persuade them that it works in people's interests, and that it negatively compares to the real common good that is being pursued by Roy and the dissenting party she has joined, which is, in many respects, *greater* than that declared by the state. In a similar way, it is while we are reading the fourth essay "Come September" that we realise the meaning of *come* as the defiant challenge to the binary rhetoric that after the 9/11 terrorist attack has halved the world between 'good and evil', a division that has tragically exasperated the historic Hindu-Muslim divide in India. Action continues in the last title, "My Seditious Heart", where *seditious* refers to India's official condemnation of Roy for 'sedition' but is made also to indicate Roy's combatively beating art and, through the etymological meaning of 'sedition', *going apart*, its progress *at variance* with that of the state. The kinetic language of these titles contains and manifests dissent. It creates a diffused ambivalence that destabilises the dominant binary-opposition narrative of the nation while voicing Roy's uncompromising antagonism. This dynamic also reproduces the author's physical participation in people's unease and protests, which is now encoded into writing, from single words to sets of paragraphs and so gets re-played each time we read and respond to their appellation to understand, to be moved, to act, giving way to a sense of justice that is therefore firstly exercised and reclaimed through language.

In what follows, I will use Jeffries' theory of opposites to examine some passages from the five articles I chose, where created opposition is foregrounded, either through single lexemes, phrases, or extended passages.

3.1. Foreword / forward

The volume's "Foreword" presents an overview of the spatiotemporal and ideological terrain upon which these essays move, at whose centre is the Narmada Valley and its people's fight and tragic defeat against the state to defend the territory from the construction of the Sardar Sarovar mega dam across the Narmada River that flows westward across the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. Roy has defined this as "the bedrock on which much of my thinking rests" (Roy 2019, p. xiv). These people's defeat despite having officially proved right and despite their protests having thoroughly been respectful of the law, brings into the picture the two ideas of homeland that have been contending for the meaning of India, which the "Foreword" presents before us asking to take one of the two sides: the 'fascist' state with its fanatic 'Hinduism', and the million non-Hindus it has dispossessed over the last decades. The "Foreword" overviews the origins of the problem in the early 1960s, its later 'developments' in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the liberalisation of the Indian economy and stops on the verge of the uncertain future ahead. Upon these grounds the essays move a straightforward opposition to the falsification of facts that the Indian government and the media have been putting in place for a long time, to cheat, colonise, and eliminate a huge number of its own people.

However, the "Foreword" reverses the idea of these people's defeat via the repetition of the word *teach* that foregrounds their moral superiority, thus converting their 'defeat' into an instructive lesson to be learned and followed. The reversal is made visually evident, since their victory is counterposed to their *going down*, and it is overall triggered by the parallel structure "*Even as* […] *even when*":

> Even as they *went down* fighting […] they *taught* me that we must make ourselves visible, even when we lose […] they also *taught* me the limitation of constitutional methods of resistance […] [and yet this hasn't been] *lesson* enough. (Roy 2019, p. xiv, emphasis added)

In a similar way, by the iterated reference to 'home' and a series of hyponyms, such as "the tribespeople of Kothie", "ancestral lands", "Kevadiya Colony", and hypernyms, such as the nation's two egomaniac monuments – one a huge statue symbolising Hindutva, the other the massive house of India's richest billionaire – symbolising liberalised economy, the "Foreword" draws a visible opposition between the state's and these people's sense of belonging:

> a 182-metre-tall bronze statue likeness of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel […] The whole of the village of Kothie, had it still existed, could have been accommodated in its big toe […] in the city of Bombay, home to the largest slums in Asia, is modern India's other great monument, Antilla, the most

> expensive private home ever built. […] home to Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man. (Roy 2019, p. xv)

Roy's essays clearly inhabit the India of the Narmada Valley's people and, to remark it, they are defined as "pieces of laundry – poor people's washing – strung out across the landscape between these two monuments, interrupting the good news bulletins and spoiling the view […] news was certainly not all good" (Roy 2019, p. xvi). The essays are also twice defined as "broken promises to myself" (Roy 2019, pp. xviii, xxiv), tangible proofs of the many times it would have been more convenient to not express public dissent, and so concrete ways by which Roy established her deep lasting bonds with India, her sense of home:

> They *opened doors* to me to secret places where few are trusted, led me into the very heart of insurrection, into places of pain, rage, and ferocious irreverence. On these journeys, I found my dearest friends, my truest loves […] unfaltering partners. (Roy 2019, p. xviii, emphasis added).

This 'home' clashes with the nation-state which opened the *doors* to fundamentalism and neocolonial policies, the fatal partnership now running the country,

> *unlocked* the protected market […] *opened another lock* […] the Babri Masjid […] to allow Hindus to warship at the site […] *lovers* performing an elaborate ritual of seduction and coquetry that could sometimes be misread as hostility. (Roy 2019, pp. xvi-xvii, emphasis added)

Roy also explains how, as celebrated Booker Prize winner, she could have stood on the limelight as a symbol of the new India but did not, and on the contrary, thought of how best to write about these disturbing times, "what did it mean to be a writer in times such as these? […] I saw that what I needed to do would challenge my abilities as a writer […] Could I turn these topics into literature? *I tried*" (Roy 2019, pp. xvii, xix).

The "Foreword" enigmatically leaves us with hints at the way by which we could help create a better future for us and the planet than that toward which we are moving, suggesting that "we will need algorithms" (Roy 2019, p. xxv) to find a way out of present ignorance about the world we have concurred to destroy, "we do not seem to have *understood* much […] have *sentenced* ourselves to an era of sudden catastrophes" (Roy 2019, p. xxv, emphasis added). And the essays are intended to be exercises to learn what happened in the last two decades and thereby to redress a lying language of opposites that has severely hindered human progress.

3.2. The end [and the aim] of imagination

In the title of the second text, "The End of Imagination", the ambivalent word *end*, meaning *death* and its antonymic *aim,* encapsulates the essay's twofold topic: the development of Roy's imaginative-political thought after winning the Booker Prize and India's destructive transformation after the atomic bomb test. This transformation structures the entire essay, whose introductory part reports the devastating effects of the 1998 nuclear bomb test in India and Pakistan, and whose second part consists in a two-sequence story titled "THE BOMB AND I", recounting Roy's journey out of and back to India. While reading the story, we come to understand that the conjunction *and* in the story title can be seen as a third dimension between the two meanings of 'end' in the essay's title, where death and life coexist until the choice is made between them and, as we finally discover, even after it is made. Overall, the dual text, therefore, mirrors India's and Roy's parallel stories about how differently they faced a huge threat to their identity as posed by the intrusion of the West and especially as posed by the response to its political expectations.

India's atomic bomb test is depicted as a world turned upside-down – "[w]hat do you do if you are trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?" (Roy 2019, p. 3). And, as a writer, Roy feels like having to resort to an already written script, a play worth being re-enacted since at stake is the loss of her true self and of India's identity:

> Let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes, and speak our secondhand lines in this secondhand play. […] But let us pause to give credit where it's due. […] The Men who made it happen. The Masters of the Universe. Ladies and gentlemen, the Unites States of America! […] Thank you for showing us the way. Thank you for altering the very meaning of life. […] Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. […] They are the ultimate colonizer. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness. (Roy 2019, pp. 2-6)

She urges everybody to do their part, to "take it personally" (Roy 2019, pp. 6, 7). So did Roy, as the title of the story indicates, in which the bomb is the glamour that invested Roy after the Booker Prize which, like the nuclear test, may have boosted her ego and shattered her identity, subjecting it to the neocolonial force of the book market (Chowdhury 2018). The story unfolds in three stages which the use of 'opposites' enables us to read also symbolically: 1) Roy's stay at an American friend's place in New York, an *architect* (like Roy) with whom she has a relationship of sameness and of contrast; 2) the confrontation of her *friend*'s fear that after stellar success death, i.e. a downfall into anonymity, will follow; 3) the return to India after 'the bomb test'. To make her *friend* fully comprehend her view, Roy writes her a message on a "kitchen napkin", where she lists her life principles as if

they were her ten commandments, making an extensive use of opposites:

> To *never forget* your own *insignificance*. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek *joy* in the *saddest* places. To pursue *beauty* to its *lair*. To never *simplify* what is *complicated* or *complicate* what is *simple*. To respect *strength*, never *power*. Above all to *watch*. To try and *understand*. To never *look away*. And never, never to forget. (Roy 2019, p. 9, emphases added)

The ten infinitives are non-negotiable complementary 'opposites'; the recurring use of *never* produces parallel sentences each one composed of further binary terms; the repetition of *never* increases the pathos and creates an ascending parable at whose top the uppermost principle stands out: always watch and remember.

Finally, strengthened by her victory over herself, Roy returns to India to find the country lying dead under the bomb's day-after effect, "a world that has been ailing for a while […] breathed its last […] cremated now […] My world has died. And I write to mourn its passage. […] The bomb is India, India is the bomb" (Roy 2019, pp. 9-12). Unlike Roy, who resisted the after-Prize impact, India has fallen under the neocolonial effect of the bomb, "a stench of fascism on the breeze" (Roy 2019, p. 9), since "nuclear tests are nationalism tests" (Roy 2019, p. 9), a conclusion that triggers Roy's wish to belong to a wider sense of India and a wider sense of citizenship:

> I'm going to step out from under the twinkling lights […] I hereby declare myself an independent mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I'm female but have nothing against eunuchs. […] Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag. (Roy 2019, p. 12)

India, however, can still come to life, reincarnate, if only one knew how to bring about that change: "There is *beauty* yet in this brutal damaged world of ours […] uniquely *ours* […] received with grace from *others* […] made *our own*. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it." (Roy 2019, p. 21, emphasis added) The essay ends with an explosive challenge to the wrongly posed syllogism "Everybody loves the bomb. Therefore the bomb is good" (Roy 2019, p. 22), which Roy turns on its head, claiming that public opinion was manipulated, people deprived of "the right to make an informed choice" (Roy 2019, p. 22). This claim is then worked up through the repetition of the phrase "Who the hell", which addresses the way consent was extorted, and leads straight to the inflexible last sentence: the bomb is "anti-democratic, a-national, a-human, outright evil" (Roy 2019, p. 23).

3.3. [Greater than] the greater common good

The essay opens with Roy's arrival in the Narmada Valley in March 1999. She is standing on a hill looking over poor villages that would most likely be swept away by the next monsoon, despite the people's victory over the state which should have stopped the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and avoided the inundation. Works were suspended in 1995, when protests were officially declared legitimate, but had just resumed and Roy had journeyed to the Valley to witness the further stage of the longstanding war between India and its own people. Over the last decades, the systematic dispossession of over forty million lower-caste non-Hindus, had passed unnoticed since the government muddied the water with its language of fake opposites that divide and confuse public opinion. So, first thing, the essay gives us a clear view of the situation, revealing the mined socio-political place Roy is standing on. Then, her sudden burst into a laughter reverses her rage, signals the beginning of the essay's battle against the state, and calls for reinforcement to resume the fight:

> I stood on a hill and laughed out loud.
>
> I had crossed the Narmada by boat from Jalsindhi and climbed the headland on the opposite bank, from where *I could see* […] the Adivasi hamlets […] *I could see* their airy, fragile homes. *I could see* their fields and the forests behind them. *I could see* little children with littler goats scuttling across the landscape […] *I knew* I was looking at a civilization older than Hinduism, slated - *sanctioned* (by the highest court in the land) to be drowned this monsoon [1999], when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir will rise to submerge it.
>
> Why did I laugh?
>
> Because I remembered the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi […] had inquired whether Adivasi children in the resettlement colonies would have children's parks to play in. […] *I looked up* at the endless sky and *down* at the river rushing past, and for a brief, brief moment the absurdity of it all *reversed my rage and I laughed*, I meant no disrespect. (Roy 2019, pp. 25-26, emphasis added)

There is no shadow of doubt that this is a hidden civil war, and from the beginning Roy's strategy is to portray it as an epical conflict (Comfort 2008) in which there is no shadow of doubt either as to who the winning heroes are, "the battle lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies amassed along them" (Roy 2019, p. 26). The evil forces are the false debates set up by politics to cancel the real facts, treacherously making the state win, "specific facts about specific issues in this specific valley – have been blunted by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated, until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away" (Roy 2019, p. 27). False oppositions have animated, exhausted, and dissolved "public perception […] into two categories" (Roy 2019, p. 27), progress versus development, which,

Roy claims, should now be replaced by the true fight: false political debate between government and its opposition versus the people's defence of their rights to live in their lands. First, the fake debate is revealed by presenting the two false antagonists, and then, by merging them through the repetition of 'both':

> *On the one hand*, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of 'Development' *versus* neo-Luddite impulse - an irrational, emotional, anti-development resistance fueled by an arcadian pre-industrial dream. *On the other*, as a Nehru **v.** Gandhi contest. This lifts the whole sorry business out of the bog of deceit, lies, false promises, and increasingly successful propaganda (which is what it's really about) and confers on it a false legitimacy. It makes out that *both sides have the Greater Good of the nation in mind* - but merely disagree about the means by which to achieve it. *Both* interpretations put a tired spin on the dispute. *Both* stir up emotions that cloud the particular facts of this particular story. *Both* are indications of how urgently we need new heroes - new kinds of heroes - and how we've overused our old ones. (Roy 2019, pp. 27-28, emphasis added)

Indian politics has become a trivial game unworthy of its past, a nation run out of heroes and ideals. The new century, therefore, is one that needs to rely on small things, or, I argue, the way things look like from far above, like the vantage point Roy has gained through the lesson learned from the Narmada Valley's people, as described in the "Foreword", and of which she has become the emblem. The essay explicitly refers to Roy as a vulture-writer attracted here by the grand story to be told and ready now to swoop down and get hold of the not yet completely buried truth:

> The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it *possibly* be? It sounds finger-licking good to me. […] Writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills. […] sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there. And what a story. (Roy 2019, pp. 28-29, emphasis added)

The text, therefore, displays new sets of 'oppositions' to bring the truth to light: facts vs false antagonisms created by the propaganda; facing the truth vs looking away. And those who cowardly do not want to see are equated with the citizens of North America, French Canada, Nazi Germany who did nothing to prevent the genocide of innocent citizens:

> I feel like somebody who's just stumbled on a mass grave […] A huge percentage of the displaced are Adivasis […]. The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the nation-builders. […] India's poorest people are subsidizing the lifestyle of the richest. […] The millions of

> displaced people don't exist anymore […] their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich […] they redefine the meaning of liberty. […] And we, like the citizens of white America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condemning it by *looking away. Why? Because we're being told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good*." (Roy 2019, pp. 33-34, emphasis added)

An increasing use of 'opposites' insists that we as rapaciously grasp the facts – "It's time to spill a few state secrets. To puncture the myth about the inefficient […] but ultimately genial, essentially democratic Indian state" (Roy 2019, p. 35). Iterated negations turn our attention toward the story that the essay is about to start telling us: "don't ignore it, don't look away"; "it isn't an easy tale to tell"; "Not anymore. Not since I began to follow the direction in which they point" (Roy 2019, p. 35). The repetition of the phrase "it's true that", followed by the adversative *yet* and *but* that introduce the opposite term, creates a balanced effect whose aim is to avoid radical claims that deny India's progress altogether and which would cancel out the credibility of what is being contested: "*It's true that* India has progressed. *It's true that* in 1947, … *It's true that* in 1995 … *It's true* that … *Yet* … *Certainly* India has progressed, *but* most of the people haven't" (Roy 2019, p. 35). The same purpose has a complex oppositional structure in which a simple opposition is contradicted by a following one that lays bare its false logic and whose formula is: x is not y (the state has not failed) *versus* x is y (the state has succeeded) *however* y is not Y (success is not real success):

> *The Indian state is not a state that has failed*. *It is a state that has succeeded* impressively in what it set out to do […] *But* its finest feat of all is the way it achieves all this and emerges swelling sweet. The way it manages to keep its secrets, to contain information. […] We take care not to dig too deep. We don't really want to know the grisly details. (Roy 2019, p. 35, emphasis added)

Finally, after fixing the new perspective, the text fuels our motivation to join in by means of further repetitive oppositional frames. Some are based on temporal prepositions like *until* or *as long as* which indicate what needs to be left behind in order to firmly move ahead into the new direction: "*Until* this process is recognized for what it is, *until* it is addressed and attacked, elections […] will continue to mock battles […] but *as long as* we have faith, we have no hope" (Roy 2019, p. 37). Another oppositional frame is based on antonyms whose contrary term (*general*/*ineffective*) is obvious: "We have to fight *specific* wars in *specific* ways, and we have to fight to *win*" (Roy 2019, p. 37). At this point, the ground has been created to absorb the urgent call contained in the story that is about to be told, and to take sides accordingly: "Listen, then, to the story of the Narmada Valley. Understand it. And, if you wish, enlist. Who knows, it may lead to magic" (Roy 2019, p. 37).

The story at the core of the text, chronicles the Valley's people's fight

against India's 'development plan', their victory also against the World Bank, which in 1993 withdrew their investment in acknowledgment that building the mega dam would cause massive environmental and human damages, and their unfair political defeat. Roy thoroughly calls them "the brave ragged army" (Roy 2019, pp. 47, 48, 51, 75) to qualify their memorable achievement but especially to trigger our sympathy for the David-and-Goliath struggle and urge us to reinforce the lines, in the belief that small is big, poor is rich, down below means on top of all:

> There has been *no army quite like this one* anywhere else in the world […] Sacking the Bank was and is *a huge moral victory* for the people of the valley […] No one had ever managed to make the World Bank step back from a project before. *Least of all a ragtag army of the poorest people in one of the world's poorest countries*. (Roy 2019, pp. 47-53)

The final part of the story takes us back to Kavadya Colony, fresh recruits, the essay hopes, in the ongoing war that may still be won if people understand that "[h]ad I not known its history nothing would have made sense. […] Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the world. Go there and secrets will be revealed to you" (Roy 2019, p. 60). We are made to meet an old member of the ragged army whose dejection does not invalidate the worthiness of the past and the present fight – "the last person I met in the valley was Bhaiji Bhai […] a pauper overnight […] forced to smile for photographs […] denied the grace of rage. […] but his story hadn't aged. It was still young and full of passion" (Roy 2019, pp. 72-73). And the essay ends by lucidly defining the power structure that regulates the unequal relation between defeated citizens and triumphant state:

> **Power** is fortified not just *by what it destroys* but also *by what it creates*. Not just *by what it takes* but also *by what it gives*. And **powerlessness** is reaffirmed not just *by the helplessness of those who have lost* but also *by the gratitude of those who have* (or *think* they have) *gained*. (Roy 2019, p. 73, emphasis added)

The power-powerlessness opposition is maintained by the destructive balance that informs both terms with loss and apparent gain, in which the apparent gain makes the overall power-powerlessness structure seem acceptable. So, the text dislodges the monstrous trick from its linguistic lair and brings it into the open:

> This cold contemporary cast of power is couched between the lines of noble-sounding clauses in democratic-sounding constitutions. It's wielded by the elected representatives of an ostensibly free people. Yet, no monarch, no despot, no dictator, has had access to weapons like these. (Roy 2019, p. 74)

Power unleashes its evil work by creating nonsense or by reverting the way things are, by interrupting meaningfulness, by breaking the connections between humans and the life around and beyond us:

> Almost without our knowing it – we are being broken […] a civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severance of the link – *the understanding* – between human beings and the planet they live on. *They scramble* the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, […] earth to human existence. *Can we unscramble it*? (Roy 2019, p. 74)

The essay closes with a final appeal to not turn our gaze away, but rather to realize and to take at heart the price that the Valley's people are still paying while the state's betrayal is being erased: "It is in the fitness of things that you understand the price that's being paid for it. That you have the courage to watch while the dues are cleared, and the books are squared. Our dues. Our books. Not theirs. Be there" (Roy 2019, p. 75).

3.4. Come September [if you dare]

This text, delivered as a speech for the first 9/11 anniversary in 2002, is a meditation on the difference between stories that are imposed upon us and require a right-wrong response to their worldview, and stories that, informed by a broader reading of reality, accordingly offer us a vast gamut of possible responses. In this respect, this essay can be also seen as a meta-reflection on the Narmada Valley's core story as told by Roy or by the state. If, on the one hand, a story calls a writer to be told, on the other, the writer, or anyone, may respond in two ways, i.e. thinkingly or obeying the reaction the call expects from us:

> [W]riters imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that […] it's actually the other way round. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. […] they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different technique of storytelling. […] the theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as nonfiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they're engaged in. […] There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So, when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit an absolute ideology against another but as a storyteller who wants to share her way of seeing. (Roy 2019, p. 187)

Unlike a reflective writer's story, nationalistic narratives divide our response into right and wrong and name us accordingly, good or evil, patriots or anti-national, as it happened for the US so-called 'war on terror' and India's war on non-Hindus, whereas the free thinker questions binary terms:

> What does the term anti-American mean? […] a deliberately and extremely effective strategy […] that simplifies reality, as America is not its political rule of the moment. […] Similarly, in India those who dissent from political rule are 'anti-Indian.' […] It is a failure of the imagination. An inability to see the world in terms other than those that the establishment has set out for you. (Roy 2019, pp. 189-190)

Along these lines, Roy asks her audience to leave this simplistic narrative and the easy response it requires, to see its real aim behind the call for justice: "post-11 September rhetoric […] a cunny recruitment drive for a misconceived, dangerous war […] a vulgar display of the business of grief, the commerce of grief, to drain it of meaning. […] corporate globalization […], the American way of life" (Roy 2019, pp. 190, 191, 203, 204). Instead, we should consider the many 9/11 anniversaries around the world that the US neocolonial expansionism caused. Could not all the people with a broader view join forces out of respect of everybody's losses that no anniversary will ever make up for?

3.5. My seditious heart [and diverging art]

The final text, which also concludes the collection, is a meditation on what it means to be trapped within the government's binary worldview in which Roy has been labelled 'anti-national', "my name was still on the A-list of 'anti-nationals' […] I wondered whether I should rethink some of my opinions" (Roy 2019, pp. 795, 796). The text is composed of an unfolding reasoning that broadens into a reminiscence of national political crises and tensions that still involve her, and which finally provides reassuring self-awareness, as well as a clear explanation of the constrained condition Roy finds herself in. Typically, this is brought into focus by an oppositional frame:

> *Now* it's true that my view on these matters is *at variance* with those of the ruling establishment. [BUT] *In better days,* that *used to be known as a critical perspective* or an alternative worldview. *These days* in India, *it's called sedition*. (Roy 2019, p.796, emphasis added)

The realisation follows that at present there is no real political opposition, no actual institutional alternative, "like having to choose between Tide and Ivory Snow, two brands of washing powder both actually owned by the same company" (Roy 2019, p. 796).

For a second time, fully aware now of her unnerving situation, her train of thoughts leads her into a detailed chronological account of the rise to power of Hindutva and of its fake political opposition (Roy 2019, pp. 801-811). It explains why joining the spontaneous party of normal free-thinking people, university students, intellectuals who complicate the picture, "the tidy

delineation of the state" (Roy 2019, p. 826), was the only choice available to her. These people's opposition takes place in a territory that predates the nation's, its partition, its divisions, its latest catastrophic progress (Roy 2019, p. 834). It is a territory that the state's simplistic requests reduce, just as they diminish democracy's complex nature and its exercise: "*Worship* a flag? My soul is either too modern or too ancient for that. I'm not sure which. Maybe both" (Roy 2019, p. 834).

4. Conclusion

Analysing Arundhati Roy's texts through Jeffries' theoretical framework has brought into focus a larger question about the oppositional structure of language as originally conceived by structuralist linguists. Even in its most oppositional mood and most drastic use of 'opposites', Roy's prose is pervaded by a tendency to articulate a more complex cognitive condition of gradation, of coexistence of contradictory terms, of self-doubt, of chaos, of illogic attitude. In this respect, Roy's language very much seems to employ 'opposites' in their grammatically realistic relation of proximity, of partial synonymity. If we follow the idea that antonymy is particularly appealing to humans because they may reflect the overall language system, then, accordingly, we should look for a structure of the language in which antonymy or partial synonymy is reflected. It was theorised as an alternative to mainstream structuralism mainly by Louis Hjelmslev, and it conceives of language as composed of relations of participatory opposition among its parts, including its paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes, so that each part and the system itself are composed of irreconcilable paradox and logical order. It is the very principle that also governs antonymy as partial synonymity.

It is only when paradigmatic possibilities are articulated onto the syntagmatic axis that possible paradoxical relations resolve into oppositional ones. However, as we saw in Roy's use of antonymic titles, the paradox may well enter logical discourse and make it ultra-logical. This signals more than the upsurge of paradoxical terms onto the syntagmatic axis of the language through the intermediate space between *langue* and *parole*, "the gaps in the binaristic model [in which] external factors from the environment […] affect the final expression" (Lacková 2022, p. 287). It marks the entrance into language of an expansive movement that stems from Roy's participation in long-lasting protest, which shapes all language levels. It is a language that is shaped also by bodily experience, which inscribes modalities of communication it partakes in, and spatiotemporal contexts that cannot be contained within a structuralist conception and use of the language and its internalised cognitive space (Canagarajah 2018). This functional role that contingency is given in the texts is made explicit in the "Foreword". Here

Roy explains that she and the editor decided to keep the repetitions that would result from collecting essays that originally had been speeches and immediate responses to specific events, to convey the sense of the circumstances in which the texts too occurred as direct participants in those events. Spatiotemporal contingency is the ground where Roy's creative language use is at work to expand its presence into past events and future scenarios where the essays want us to stand too and do our part.

However, even more important when it comes to trying to inspire and bring such an effective social change through language, is the way in which these extremely combative and determined texts are woven by a sense of unpredictability, of unexpectedness, a principle that post-structuralist linguists have long explored (see, for instance, Pennycook 2012, pp. 17-37). In Roy's case, it seems to rely on science, language's historical partner in all turning-point moments of cultural re-conceptualisations, since the texts leave us with post-human considerations of the way we should learn connectiveness and cooperation from the smallest creatures who, like us and perhaps better than we, work for survival and collective wellbeing. Could humans take example from them, the way algorithms have? This seems to be the sense of the recurrent reference to Roy's poetics of 'small things' emerging in her political texts: "Perhaps things will go worse and then better. Perhaps there is a *small god* up in heaven readying herself for us […] she is on her way […] if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing" (Roy 2019, pp. 28-29, 304). More than hope for a better future, this looks like an ecological, nature-inspired employment of "the concrete sounds of the material environment" (Lobnick 2016, p. 116). It reads like unfathomable and yet articulated belief that we can find directions from forces outside and beyond us but which most likely we also own and can put to good use, starting, perhaps, with a language change.

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LEARNING TO UNLEARN
Koleka Putuma's Poetry and Performances

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Abstract – The aim of this article is to discuss some works of the South African poet, theatre practitioner, playwright, performer, feminist, and queer activist Koleka Putuma. The article's main focus will be some poems from Putuma's collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017), now a bestseller in South Africa. *Collective Amnesia* is the point of both arrival and departure of different kinds of art, such as poetry performances, video productions, and theatre plays. Putuma's poems deal with historical issues and memory/ies, in particular with slavery and with the repressed presence of black women in South African history. By questioning the past and the way its narration registers and/or erases memories, Putuma produces a decolonial counter-discourse which conceives art as a political practice, that is a form of *art*ivism, whereby notions of identities are complicated and extended rather than standardised and circumscribed. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989), this article will show how in Putuma's works borders and boundaries – in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, class, economic status, etc. – come to the fore in order to allow new and more flexible paradigms with which to narrate post-transitional South Africa. Many of the discourses emerging from her written as well as performed/filmed works promote a re-appropriation of black women's bodies while endorsing their empowerment, also through a collective *unlearning*, a fundamental process if one wants to rewrite history/ies from female, feminist, and queer perspectives.

Keywords: Koleka Putuma; South African women poetry; post-transitional South Africa; artivism; black feminism.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to shed light on some works of the South African poet, theatre practitioner, playwright, performer, feminist, and queer Cape-Town based artist/activist, from now on *artivist*,[1] Koleka Putuma (Port Elizabeth, 1993). Putuma's first collection of poems, *Collective Amnesia*, unexpectedly became a bestseller in the South African printing industry market in 2017, when it came out thanks to the efforts of an independent publishing house, uHlanga Press, which issued it with a small budget in a very limited number of copies. In spite of the difficulties poetry books usually meet in reaching wide audiences and in making it into the South African book-market, *Collective*

[1] I here use this term according to how it is discussed in Serafini (2018).

Amnesia sold more than 6,000 copies in less than two years, a figure that has more than doubled by now, and, while being the recipient of many prestigious awards, including some hardly ever assigned to poetry before (such as the Standard Bank Young Artist Award, won in 2022), it is currently in its 12th print run.[2]

Although there has been an amazing rise in women's publication across Africa in the new millennium (see Xaba 2019, p. 18), the case of Putuma stands out for its exceptionality. *Collective Amnesia*'s poems have travelled the world (and the web) with their author in performances and public readings. Translated into seven European languages (the eighth, Italian, is forthcoming), the collection is now a prescribed text in secondary schools and university *sillabi* in South Africa. This is an outstanding achievement in a country where black poetry in general and black women poetry in particular were never included in school *curricula*. It goes without saying that Putuma's collection is also the object of national and international academic research. The popularity of *Collective Amnesia*'s poems, as a matter of fact, has also rocketed the political arena, and in massive demonstrations against gender based violence such as the Total Shut Down march held in August 2018 throughout many Southern African countries, Putuma's lines – "I don't want to die with my hands up or legs open" (Putuma 2020a, p. 77)[3] – were quoted on banners next to other feminist slogans. As Chelsea Haith has pointed out, *Collective Amnesia* has pushed the margins into the mainstream and managed to become a *cultural object* itself in the multifaceted popular culture of post-transitional South Africa (Haith 2018, p. 46).

Due to their uncompromising and outspoken ethical and political commitment, Putuma's works have also attracted negative reactions. During the 2015 TEDxStellenbosch event, part of the (mostly white) audience showed resentment at her performance of *Water* to the point that the organisers later awkwardly asked the artivist the permission not to upload that part of her presentation.[4] A minority of dissenting but very aggressive comments can also be read, amid a flood of enthusiastic ones, below some of her videos online. Putuma's artivism hits many raw nerves and shows that there is the necessity to rethink, indeed, a number of yet unsorted issues in today's South Africa.

Nothing for Putuma's artivism is beyond or above criticism, including some spectacular accomplishments achieved by the country after the end of apartheid such as Nelson Mandela's iconic presidency (1994-1999), the Truth

[2] After the first printings with uHlanga, *Collective Amnesia* was re-published in 2020 in a new edition under Putuma's own company, Manyano Media. All the quotations in this article are from this edition.

[3] Putuma titled this very short poem "Memoirs of a Slave & Queer Person", unveiling a link between slavery and homophobia.

[4] *Water* was thereafter included in *Collective Amnesia*. For Koleka Putuma's open letter to the TEDxStellenbosch's organisers, see Word N Sound Live Literature Movement (2015).

and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998), or the South African Constitution (1996), where in Section 9(3) of Chapter 2 (Bill of Rights) one can read:

> The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* 1996)

Impeccable in its formulation, this provision often finds no tangible validations in the daily life of the majority of South Africans, who experience intersected forms of discrimination that highlight the gap between proclamations and reality. It is a hiatus that maintains and produces old and new minorities showing, as the South African writer and performer Lebogang Mashile has recently remarked, that apartheid's legacy is still very much conditioning South Africa despite this enlightened constitution (Mashile 2019, p. 220).

Putuma's engagement expands beyond her personal artistic performances. In 2019, she founded Manyano Media, a multidisciplinary creative company that "aims to create a counter-archive which disrupts and reimagines narratives about black and queer women on and off stage" (*Manyano Media* 2023). With a view to supporting black and queer women storytellers in South Africa, Manyano Media also promotes a yearly Black Girl Live Fellowship to help women implement their creative projects by providing them with mentors, access to professional networks, and spaces for the development of their ideas. To put it in other words, in a country where every three hours a woman is murdered, where 'corrective rape' of queer individuals is a widespread hate crime, and where the female body enjoys centrality and hypervisibility only vis-à-vis tragedy, Manyano Media encourages and supports new forms of (positive) artistic (re)actions to this largely overlooked or, at least, never seriously tackled crisis.

2. Re-focusing on black women's bodies

A collection of poems with a coherent articulation of its own, *Collective Amnesia* is also the point of both arrival and departure of other forms of art such as endless poetry performances; *Water*, a video production directed by Ecuadorian José Cardoso featuring Putuma herself and released one year before the collection came out; another solo version of *Water* published in 2019 with photographs by Noncedo Gxekwa; a much acclaimed theatre play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, staged for the first time at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 2019 and published as an independent text in 2021, etc. Each one of these different productions offers new readings of its versatile author:

in the way her words interact with the many non-verbal features of her works (colours, lights, soundtracks, images, music, filming and editing, costumes, paraphernalia, etc.) and/or according to how her gestures, voice, silences, comments, jokes, laughter, sighs, breathing, etc. help to shape her live performances.[5]

Following the success of *Collective Amnesia*, in 2021 Putuma published a second collection of poems titled *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i], where she continues to experiment with the language and formal structures of poetry, amplifying her perspective from *Collective Amnesia*'s ultimate South African focus to a broader one, enriched by her recent travels in Northern Europe. *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i] delves into many of the issues at the heart of *Collective Amnesia*, in particular the invisibility of black people/women's stories and bodies. Indicating the perspective and purpose of the whole collection, its opening poem, "THIS IS NOT A DRILL", begins as follows:

> for those of us
> whose lives are placed adjacent
> next to/or somewhere
> where the microscope
> cannot find us
> cannot locate where the story begins
> cannot write our stories without tragedy
> (Putuma 2021a, p. 13)

It may be useful here to point out the anaphora that signals an impossibility ("cannot") related to space and mapping ("find" and "locate") and that ends up affecting the act of writing itself. Like *Collective Amnesia*, also *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i] gathers new and previously published/performed/filmed works such as the gripping poem "Every / Three Hours", which came out in print for the first time in 2019 in the *Johannesburg Review of Books* and travelled the country in Putuma's even more suggestive video *The Poet Protesting Femicide in South Africa* (2020), realised by the artivist for a massive national campaign against violence on women and homophobia.

Putuma's engagement with multimediality and multimodality should be read as a decolonial practice which aims to undermine the power of the (exclusively) written word as it is understood in Western epistemology. Her texts, whether they are on paper, read and/or performed live or recorded, reveal how urgent issues can surface from silence to overlap, intersect, friction together in an (un)balanced scenario which is always different, always moving from and going to new experiences, both for the artivist and for her audience/readers.

A questioning attitude towards the practice of archiving, a multimodal approach to art, a queer focus on the intertwining of history and religion, a

[5] Some of Putuma's performances can be watched online on her website (see *Koleka Putuma* 2021).

special attention to how colonial discourses and postures are still very much at work in post-transitional South Africa, and a consistent challenge to the concept and practices of memory and remembering, especially when it comes to black women bodies' erasure or hypersexualisation, are some of the key factors at the core of Putuma's work. This change of focus aimed at re-positioning black women's bodies is a decolonial practice Putuma shares with many colleagues from new and old generations alike, such as Sindiwe Magona, Makhosazana Xaba, Lebogang Mashile, Malika Ndlovu, Natalia Molebatsi, Yvette Christiansë, etc. (see Boswell 2016, p. 11). Drawing on both *slam poetry* and the Black canon (Toni Morrison, Steve Biko, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sello Duiker are but some of the references surfacing from her texts) and relying on previous theatre training, Putuma forges an experimental lyrical world that disputes normative versions of South African identities based on white and/or black hetero-patriarchal history.

The poem "Lifeline", in *Collective Amnesia*, writes back to an exclusively male canon suggesting the existence of a female one. The poem lists – without comments, descriptions, or introductions – sixty-eight names of black women (young, old, middle-aged, queer, heterosexual, dead, alive, rich, poor, average, iconic, less known, etc.) who were/are active in different fields ranging from art to law and politics. These names constitute Putuma's personal universe of artistic, political, ethical references. Addressed like many of her poems to an explicit "you", here slightly perceived like an antagonist, "Lifeline" switches to a new addressee (the black girl) in its final lines. The use of italics stresses how *vital* the acknowledgement of this black female canon/lifeline is, not only for aesthetic reasons but also for young women's empowerment and for their physical survival in a (still) very hostile and misogynistic environment:

> you will say that this is not a poem
> and I will say that you are right:
> it is not.
>
> it is a lifeline.
>
> every name
> is a gospel shut up in my bones.
> every name
> chants
> *Black girl -*
> *Live!*
> *Live!*
> *Live!*
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 87)

The success of Putuma's poetry is quite unexpected in a context shaped and dominated by male ideology: one which is both a legacy of colonialism and a feature of the mainstream current political, cultural, and social practices of post-transitional South Africa. Many poems in *Collective Amnesia* offer images of toxic relationships women should get out of. This is the case of "In the Emergency Room", in which the hidden presence of violence within a domestic environment comes to the fore:

> Things you don't tell your family:
>
> Your marriage was a miscarriage.
> He almost killed you.
>
> But you stayed
> *for the children,*
> you said.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 68)

In the above lines, one can perceive an intimate relationship between the lyrical voice and the addressee ("you") to the point that the two might overlap and merge one into the other, as if the poetic persona were speaking to herself. The internal rhyme and the acoustic similarity between the words "marriage" and "miscarriage" throw a sinister light on the line "*for the children*" (highlighted by the use of italics), letting the reader wonder about their survival (and that of the woman who "stayed") in a context of domestic violence which includes an attempted murder and a violence-induced abortion.

A broader criticism, where private and public spheres mix and the lyrical voice speaks both as a mother (in italics) and as a comrade, can be found in "On Black Solidarity", a long poem presented as a double list, by numbers and by ball points. The formal rigidity of the structure mimics the inflexibility of commonplaces about unity and solidarity within black communities, a positive but unrealistic depiction that here Putuma challenges (2020a, p. 83):

> 7. *Give me one rapper I can trust my son's ear with.*
> *Give me one lyric I can trust my daughter's image with.*
>
> 8. • You want black womxn's bodies on the line.
> • Not the frontline.
> • You endorse intersectionality.
> • But not at the expense of your praise and visibility.
>
> 9. Terms and conditions of your solidarity:
> • No feminism
> • Limited feminism
> • No feminism that exposes patriarchy
> • No feminism that disturbs patriarchy
> • Only feminism that will show up with pompoms

Lingue e Linguaggi

No matter how much (black) men can call themselves *feminist*, patriarchy remains unaffected, as stanza 9 shows by listing some ironical "terms and conditions" that would secure the liberalist agenda described and contested in stanza 8. The obsessive repetition of the word "feminism" and the slight adjustments made around it line after line ("no" / "limited"; "exposes" / "disturbs") in stanza 9 create a crescendo that flows in the ironic conclusion portraying a domesticated feminism with fluffy balls, thereby ridiculing the whole (male) hypocrite reasoning behind it.

It is not common to find such a frank black-on-black criticism in South African literature. During apartheid, black men's violence and abuse on their female counterparts, whether in the struggle, at work, in the streets or at home, were silenced because there was a more important battle to fight; internal 'disputes' should not break the front, and "defensive priorities", as Kimberlé Crenshaw calls such instances, prevailed (Crenshaw 1989, p. 162). Despite that, some South African literary icons such as Miriam Tlali (1933-2017) – one of the names listed in "Lifeline" – were brave enough to unveil in their writings a taboo which was destined to remain, though, largely unacknowledged until recently. Putuma's attack comes from her tireless commitment in the South African campaigns against violence on women and femicides. "On Black Solidarity" is a particularly defying poem because it discloses a widespread culture of gender discriminations that takes for granted women as objects, often sexual objects (as in many rap songs), creating that ground where they are hit, silenced, underestimated. Putuma is keen in underlining that there is a heavy responsibility and a double loss in all this, and addressing black men she writes:

> 6. • Your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining black womxn's struggle.
> • Tell it to wait.
> • Tell it to stop dividing black people.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 83).

3. Decolonising the archive

Collective Amnesia is composed by forty-eight poems of different length, divided into three sections titled *Inherited Memory*, *Buried Memory* and *Postmemory*. Five poems in particular catch the eye because they consist only of a title and a short footnote, respectively placed on top and at the bottom of an empty page. The absence of the main text acts, in part, as a silent comment on the marginalisation of the questions raised by the titles and briefly explained in the glosses. Significantly, *Collective Amnesia*'s opening poem is one of those. Titled "Storytelling", it brings to mind oral traditions and their weight in the transmission of memories. Its footnote reads: "How my people remember. How my people archive. How we inherit the world" (Putuma

2020a, p. 14). Putuma has often stressed the importance of memories passed down from one generation to the other, and how this influences the way we are in the world (see Putuma, Pedersen 2022). "Storytelling"'s anaphoric footnote suggests that there is, possibly, a correction to be made about archives. The blank space between title and footnote is both waiting to be filled and indicating an aporia, as not everyone archives the past in the same way. How do we store oral stories? Does their absence from material archives and writing mean that they do not exist? The poems coming after "Storytelling", then, partially fill that gap in the archive unlocking doors, providing new perspectives – "from which point do we want to see the world?" (Putuma, Pedersen 2022) –, offering new stories from scratch or complicating old tales by providing details that did not get enough attention, were silenced, could not be recorded, or went deliberately unregistered.

Artists' creative power can be more effective than the work of historians in places where sources are unwritten, scarce, or dubious. As Barbara Boswell has remarked, "[r]e-memoring is often a mode of engagement with history's *lacunae* for postcolonial artists" (Boswell 2016, p. 13). Personal memories and a more inclusive idea of history can make all the difference. Re-memoring and re-membering via storytelling also constitute a healing process as "[s]tories create meaning for our memories and enable us as African people to unlearn the lessons of traumatic experiences" (Williams, Molebatsi 2019, p. 103). Artistic experiences produce growth also through *subtraction*: a crucial and unexpected step to achieve different frameworks within which the (traumatised) individual can more comfortably fit in and, if he/she/they wants, finally move on.

Inherited Memory, the section opened by "Storytelling", coherently includes poems dealing with community life and childhood memories in the aftermath of the end of apartheid. It is a sort of autobiographical coming-of-age chapter, which comprises poems about the process of growing up in a humble but not necessarily unhappy environment ("Black Joy"), about the awareness of the oppressive role played by religion and the Church both from the viewpoint of race ("Growing Up Black & Christian") and of gender ("No Easter Sunday for Queers"), about family relationships ("Aviophobia"), about how differently old and new generations cope (or do not cope) with major and minor traumas ("Graduation"), about the joy of sex ("Coming Home"), about love relationships that fatally end because they simply do not work ("Twenty-one Ways of Leaving", "Promised Land").

Putuma contests the artistic portrayal of black children's suffering – the "poverty porn" (Haith 2018, p. 42) – and of black adults only depicted while protesting at the expenses of lines that could easily engage with their joyful memories and moments. Perceiving herself as one of those misrepresented kids and later young adults, in "Black Joy" she offers scattered memories about her childhood: its games and little misdemeanours, eating and sleeping with

friends, neighbours and cousins. The poem finally switches from the apposition of the plural pronouns we/they (blacks/non-blacks) to the singular I/you (poet/white reader or readers)[6] and ends with a synecdoche whereby the poet is indicated by her shouting mouth which, via simile, reinforces the concept of *pain* through the displeasing picture of a suppurating wound:

> We were home and whole.
>
> But
> Isn't it funny?
> That when they ask about black childhood,
> all they are interested in is our pain,
> as if the joy-parts were accidental.
>
> I write love poems too,
> but
> you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,
> as if my mouth were a wound
> with pus and gangrene
> for joy.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 15-16)

Collective Amnesia also digs through repressed/forgotten memories, identities, and histories: suppressed because they did not fit it, or because they belonged to minorities cut off from the unifying rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation, in spite of the multiple nature this was meant to evoke. Retrieving these parts of South African memories, identities, histories through art, whether written or performed, constitutes an act of restoring; to use some eloquent lines from Putuma's second collection of poems:

> let us begin:
>
> writing
> as it was
> as it is
> is how we exhume
> the bodies
> and give them
> names.
> (Putuma 2021a, p. 14)

It is a *secular* process of baptising and resurrecting at a time multiple pasts that needs artivism to be accomplished; a process that constitutes a decolonial aesthetics whereby unrepresented identities and realities acquire depth because they are named, read, seen, told, acknowledged, performed for the first time.

[6] Interpreting *you* as a plural pronoun here would not substantially alter the outcome.

As Annel Pieterse, drawing from Walter Mignolo, has rightly remarked, it means thinking in terms of *enunciation* rather than *representation*, inventing rather than describing; such a process needs to start from the practice of de-linking oneself from colonial (and postcolonial) forced identifications (Pieterse 2018, p. 37).

If it is true that forgiving and forgetting are important steps in overcoming South Africa's violent and undemocratic past, it is equally true that, as with all traumas, one needs to know what to forget, which makes the act of remembering a *prerequisite* for a healthy process of archiving. In spite of the many efforts to deal with the past, among which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission stands out, parts of South African history fell victim to collective amnesia because they did not fit in with 'official' representations of reality. Many stories never surfaced from the past, some were and are still overcelebrated, while others are remembered in selective and detrimental ways. Putuma's post-transitional discourse rejects "the notion of the nation as a cohesive rainbow" (Haith 2018, p. 42) and underlines, at times with sharp irony, the lack of both redistribution of wealth and compensation for the damages suffered without which reconciliation remains impracticable. One of the five poems made of title and footnote only is called "Apartheid" and its gloss reads: "A genocide that can still be found in township" (Putuma 2020a, p. 112). Such a statement is in line with the position of all those young people, including Putuma, for whom apartheid is *postmemory* and who are very critical about South Africa's post-transition. But there is no way out and one has to go back, as *Collective Amnesia* does, to the country's past in order to understand its present shortcomings. Overwhelmed by a myriad of private tales and versions of its history during the immediate post-apartheid, eager to overcome the pains and faults, but also forced to see the glass half full, maybe South Africa was not really ready to archive its past in the 1990s. Although this is a very tricky issue and a slippery ground, one has to admit that too many nasty experiences could not realistically disappear so quickly behind the rainbow.

In the last poem of *Collective Amnesia*, "Afterlife", the unsolved issues of South African transition, such as the relationship between truth and reconciliation, are 'loudly' spoken out:

> hell
> will be the graves of our forefathers turned inside-out
> to revenge the truth
>
> what did you expect,
> living in a haunted house
> and calling yourself free or pardoned?
>
> tell them Hallelujah sounds like

black people
burping:
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
(Putuma 2020a, p. 114)

The evocations of the country as a haunted house and of a freedom/pardon possibly too easily granted are followed by the 'indecent' simile that compares the spiritual utterance "Hallelujah" to the bodily sound of a burp. Saying "Hallelujah" to the forefathers would be insulting if the word, according to the religious context of its origin, indicates regeneration. The benefit of a *symbolic* resurrection did not concern such people, because the black community has not enjoyed any reconciliation with the past, nor has it ever been *materially* compensated for the losses suffered. Consequently, the word "Justice" – written in capital letters and followed by an exclamation mark – emerges, undigested, from the innermost part of the dead black body to grow on the page, repeated six times, as a chant, as a louder and louder cry. Its reiteration via rising size and gradually increasing indentation also produces the optical effect of movement. Since this is the last word of the whole collection, its significance cannot go unnoticed. Speaking of sin and hell, the poem plays with the abstract, religious concepts that animated the South African post-apartheid reconciliation – it is useful to remember here that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was after all chaired by an archbishop – but it seems to refer to a pragmatic 'afterlife' that has more to do with the actual country and with an *earthly* justice than with a theological, intangible Afterworld and its *divine* justice.

4. The memory of water

The poem that engages with historical repression the most in *Collective Amnesia* is "Water" from the section called *Postmemory*, one of Putuma's most famous works to date thanks to its many live performances and José Cardoso's popular short film (InZync Jiráfica, 2016).[7] The text consists of about a

[7] InZync Jiráfica is a network born from the collaboration between InZync Poetry, a non-profit organisation that promotes South African Cape multimodal and multilingual poetry performances, and Jiráfica, a nomadic film production company operating in Spanish-speaking countries and

hundred lines and, once again, personal and collective memories overlap, alternate, and mix together.

"Water" begins with the lyrical first-person's recollection of New Year's Eve at the seaside when she was a kid and the elders would forbid children to play underwater among waves. What would normally be considered a ban based on common sense acquires, though, a different meaning as the poem progresses:

> How the elders would forbid us from going in too deep
> to giggle, to splash in our black tights
> and Shoprite plastic bags wrapped around our new weaves,
> forbid us from riding the wave
> for fear we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide
> and never to return,
> like litter.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 98)

The "mass of blackness swept by the tide and never to return, like litter" can be easily read as a metaphor for slavery, today one of the most disputed repressions in South African history. At the crossroads between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, South Africa was often the final destination of a Southern sea-route dislocating and trading enslaved people from East Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, Zanzibar and later on from Malaysia, India and even China: a route that was navigated for centuries, that involved women in particular, and one that is only recently getting the same scholarly attention hitherto reserved for the "Black Atlantic".[8]

According to Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden, the lack of a South African slave narrative and of physical places dedicated to the memory of enslaved people have encouraged many forms of amnesia in the country (Ward, Worden 2008, p. 202). If places of remembrance and commemoration, national sites and monuments are needed to give tangibility to memory and history, water resists human manipulation and becomes, instead, the *metaphor* of suppressed pasts, as Bibi Burger has underlined in discussing Putuma's work (Burger 2020, p. 35). "Water" challenges the amnesia surrounding slavery by re-formulating the ocean as historical a fabric as the earth. The sea is simultaneously a place of transit and of death (therefore also a grave), a material and a spiritual site. In order to accept this multiple, porous, different version of water, one must first get rid of the meanings it had/has for white people. First of all, one needs, as Isabel Hofmeyr puts it, to "decolonize the ocean" starting from acknowledging "the relations of power that have been

South Africa. It is not possible in this article to discuss both the written poem and the video at length; therefore, my analysis will be limited to some aspects of both works.

[8] See, in particular, Hofmeyr (2007, 2019) and Badeeron (2009).

shaped around water and its colonial appropriation" (Hofmeyr 2019, pp. 12-13) and its subsequent consumerism as a place of fun for white people:

> They mock us
> for not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental in
> trying to execute our extinction.
> For you, the ocean is for surfboards, boats and tans
> and all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles.
> But we,
> we have come to be baptised here.
> We have come to stir the other world here.
> We have come to cleanse ourselves here.
> We have come to connect our living to the dead here.
> Our respect for water is what you have termed fear.
> The audacity to trade and murder us over water
> then mock us for being scared of it.
> The audacity to arrive by water and invade us.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 99)

The daughter and granddaughter of ministers, Putuma is familiar with the Holy Scripture and with the combination of text and performance in the mass. Her poetry abounds in religious references and/or allusions. It also relies on some linguistic strategies typical of sermons. In the above lines it is worth underlining the switch from "they" to "you" referring to white people and the rhetorical effect of the plural "we", which first appears after a contrastive conjunction ("but") and then gains emphasis (and agency) via the anaphora "we have come to...". Baptism, the other world, the connection between the living and the dead in the above quoted lines are developed further on in the poem and even more in the video, in which the discussion about Christian symbols takes place in a church where Putuma, whispering, *confesses* with irony that she has always had a troubled relationship with God. The link between Christianity and patriarchy, the former introduced by European missionaries and colonisers, the latter its emanation, goes back to the coming-of-age section of *Collective Amnesia* where, in the poem "Growing up Black & Christian", the guilty association between colonialism and religion is openly denounced:

> The first man
> you are taught to revere
> is a white man.
> [...]
> The gospel
> is how whiteness breaks into our homes
> and brings us to our knees.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 25)

It is worth underlining here the use of the present tense – "is", "breaks" and "brings" – which highlights an on-going process of subjugation. The fatal bond has produced the cultural asset of the present world, including its racism, gender discrimination, and particularly homophobia.[9] Feminism and queerness cannot but intersect with issues of race in Putuma's incendiary criticism of religion:

> This blue-eyed and blond-haired Jesus I followed in Sunday school
> has had my kind bowing to a white and patriarchal heaven,
> bowing to a Christ, his son, and 12 disciples.
> For all we know,
> the disciples could have been queer,
> the Holy Trinity some weird, twisted love triangle,
> and the Holy Ghost transgender.
> But you will only choose to understand the scriptures that suit your agenda.
> You have taken the liberty to colonize the concept of God;
> gave God a gender, a skin colour,
> and a name in a language we had to twist our mouths around.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 100-101)

These lines constitute a sharp attack to a theology historically shaped in such a way as to create exclusions by reinforcing binary notions of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Putuma's ironical interpretation of divine figures according to sexual preferences acts as a challenge that emphasises the erasure, if not the outright condemnation, of LGBTQIA+ individuals by and within the Church. This position is also shared by prominent writers belonging to older generations such as Sindiwe Magona (1943), whose words of comment on the works of the South African non-binary visual artivist Zanele Muholi have similar tones:

> The truth is that binary notions of gender and sexual relationship were enforced by colonial powers. As Donna Smith, former director of Forum for the Empowerment of Women, explains, 'some people believe homosexuality is an idea brought [to Africa] by the white man. But it has always been here. What the white man brought was homophobia clothed in religious doctrine that we did not have before'. (Magona 2020, p. 113)

"Water" celebrates a secular albeit spiritual baptism that could mark a new beginning, here interpreted as a resurrection. In the closing lines historical resentment and reproach for past (and present) violence mix with Biblical

[9] The role played by the Church in gender discrimination and homophobia is the main subject of "No Easter Sunday for Queers", a tragic and at times ironical poem (and then a play) in which the lyrical I is divided between her life in the Northern Suburb (a bigot environment where she, as the daughter of a pastor, is forced to be a closeted lesbian) and her life in the Southern Suburb (the place of politics and protests, of the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, of queer life, etc.). Misogyny, though, is overspread and at work in both places, as she says: "my body is at the mercy of men" (Putuma 2020a, p. 29).

imagery. In what looks like a possible 'last supper', forgiveness cannot be granted; grief and rage for past deeds are still intoxicating the present and the conversation *has to be* about tough questions possibly never raised before:

> If you really had to write our stories,
> then you ought to have done it in our mothers' tongues,
> the ones you cut off when you fed them a new language.
>
> We never consent.
> Yet we are asked to dine with the oppressors
> and serve them forgiveness.
> How,
> when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage?
>
> Another one (who looks like me) died today.
> Another one (who looks like me) was murdered today.
> May this be the conversation at the table
> and we can all thereafter wash this bitter meal with amnesia.
>
> And go for a swim after that.
> Just for fun.
> Just for fun.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 101-102)

It is useful to see how José Cardoso has edited the scenes corresponding to the above lines in the video of *Water* (Cardoso 2016). From the Church setting, where Putuma whispers her rejection of the whites' colonisation of God, the camera blurs the close-up of the poet and switches abruptly to an outdoor scene. We hear Putuma (without seeing her) recite in a city street crowded with people walking. It is an everyday scenario with students just out of school, a protester with a banner against Western imperialism, men and women coming from/going to work or just hanging around. Some briefly stop to watch the camera and the poet we do not see, but they quickly move on. When Putuma utters the first-person pronoun – "when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage" – the camera focuses on her with a medium long shot that highlights her figure – her gaze is fixed on us – and speech. The people around her are now blurry. The exact moment she says the word *amnesia*, the scene returns to the beginning of the video, when Putuma was on a rock by the ocean. From that rock now she recites the last few lines without watching the camera. The video closes on her, silent, walking in the sea, her feet in the seaweed which are briefly shown. The camera focuses on the seaweeds also in some long sequences at the beginning of the video, when Putuma recites offstage:

> Yet every time our skin goes under,
> it's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains,
> and the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore,
> whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 98)

The abundance of the sibilant 's' in the third line above creates a sound suggesting sweetness in stark contrast with the harshness of the line's meaning; a harshness reiterated in the alliterating juxtaposition of "sailed and sunk" in the following line. A material grave and a symbolic place of remembrance, "Water"'s water can be used by black people for baptism and to wash away resentment, that is, to finally *unlearn* the traces of past traumas so as to be able to enjoy the sea "just for fun". The condition, though, is the "bitter meal",[10] a complicated dialogue that would break the circle José Cardoso sharply stresses by opening and closing the video with the artivist in the same position and in the same sea setting, her feet moving among reeds/chains. A dialogue hitherto evaded.

By putting memory, history, and religion in conversation with each other and with the present, Koleka Putuma unveils the need for a counter-archive where to store what went unrecorded. While in *Collective Amnesia* she contests the inappropriateness of 'material' archives for such a re-memoring, on the other hand, with "Water", she also encourages us to consider this element in its materiality and to let the ocean unfold the stories it has been preserving for centuries.

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[10] Significantly, the Passover meal some claim to be also Christ's last supper included bitter herbs to remind Jewish people of the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt.

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CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE
Diversity and Translated Fiction in the UK Publishing Industry

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Abstract – Though sales from translated fiction in the UK are worth £20 million per year with a growth of 5.5% per annum, thus outpacing the rest of the publishing industry, focus on literature translated into English has begun to shift from quantity (see, for example, Büchler, Trentacosti 2015) to questions of diversity (see Chitnis *et al.* 2017). The often-quoted 3% figure, which has traditionally represented the proportion of literature in English originally written in other languages, has risen more recently to around 5% (see Anderson 2019). However, continued emphasis on this statistic risks eclipsing other issues of diversity, and a growing number of voices in both academic and industry contexts have drawn attention to the imperative to address this. Particular areas of discussion are the lack of gender equality, with less than a third of books published in translation being authored by women (see Derbyshire 2016), and linguistic/geopolitical bias, with some regions and languages being much better represented than others (see Patel, Youssef 2022). These issues of diversity are indicative of broader concerns within the publishing industry, where research suggests that diversity has plateaued (Joynson 2021). In this article we aim to identify some of the factors that contribute to the continued lack of diversity in literature translated into English, through the lens of the two activist initiatives with which we have been involved. These have potential to make a significant contribution to changing the landscape of literature in translation, but we will also consider their possible limitations, and where work still needs to be done.

Keywords: translated fiction; diversity; PEN Presents; Warwick Prize for Women in Translation; publishing industry.

1. Introduction

In an impassioned plea to the publishing industry in 2021, editor Eleanor Dryden called on stakeholders to "publish beyond bias" (Dryden 2021), by addressing multiple and insidious instances of bias inherent to decisions and practices. This ethos of "publishing beyond bias" guides our approach in this article. Our scrutiny of imbalances in translated literature has been shaped by two recent initiatives with which we have been closely involved: (1) In 2017 the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (WPWiT) was established at the University of Warwick by Chantal Wright, in response to male-dominated

literary prize lists.[1] The WPWiT has the potential to make significant positive changes by showcasing new writing by women in translation and raising the profile of authors, translators, and writing from under-represented regions and social groups. (2) In 2021 Helen Vassallo began working with English PEN (a worldwide writers' association that facilitates and promotes the translation into English of published works in foreign languages) on the new digital publishing initiative PEN Presents, which funds and promotes samples of translated literature not yet available in full English translation.

While these and other activist interventions have been crucial in raising awareness of existing and pervasive imbalances in the commission and publication of literature in translation, they have revealed further biases that need attention. For example, recent studies by Margaret Carson (2019, 2020) have provided evidence of the ongoing barriers to gender parity in translation, and a new collection of essays on translation edited by Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang (2022) has highlighted the extent to which racial and geopolitical bias are additional barriers.

In the first part of the article, we will analyse the pool of submissions and the shortlists for the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation for the period 2017 to 2022. We will also consider shortlisted translators' responses to a questionnaire that aimed to identify the factors and agents that contribute to the publication and success of translated titles written by women.

The second part of the article will focus on PEN Presents, a digital platform showcasing funded translation samples of original and diverse literature not yet available in full English translation. Its ambitious aim is to shift the landscape of translated literature, mobilising PEN's global networks to ensure the widest possible range of representation and to effect cultural change in the ways in which translated literature is commissioned and promoted in the UK and beyond.

2. The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation: gender and bibliodiversity

2.1. Bibliodiversity beyond gender?

The WPWiT is an annual prize that is awarded to a literary work[2] authored by a woman, translated into English by a translator or translators of any gender,

[1] Chantal Wright's personal involvement with the Prize ended in 2022.

[2] The Prize accepts entries in a wide variety of genres: literary fiction (novels, novellas, and short stories), poetry, literary non-fiction, works of fiction for children and young adults, graphic novels and play texts. The rules on eligibility have shifted since 2017: play texts were added to the list of eligible genres in 2018 following lobbying by theatre translators; multi-author anthologies are now no longer eligible; self-translations have become eligible. See the Prize's website (University of Warwick 2020) for full details of eligibility, terms, and conditions.

and which must have been published in the UK or Ireland within the twelve months preceding a given year's submission period. The prize was established at the University of Warwick in 2017 with internal funds from the University's Connecting Cultures Global Research Priority. It received additional funding from 2020 onwards from the British Centre for Literary Translation, the British Comparative Literature Association and the Warwick Institute of Engagement. It has been judged by the same team of judges since 2017: Susan Bassnett, Amanda Hopkinson, and Boyd Tonkin. The Prize came into being against the background of a pre-existing Women in Translation movement and grew out of a grassroots movement led by a number of women in the Anglophone literary translation community who were aware that female authors were underrepresented both as a percentage of books translated and on literary shortlists.[3] The reflections and analysis here focus on the first six years of the Prize's existence, from 2017 to 2022, and draw on statistics gathered by the University of Warwick during the submissions process and on written interviews conducted with shortlisted translators.[4]

The number of eligible entries submitted to the Prize increased substantially and more or less consistently between 2017 and 2022, rising from 58 to 138, with a total of 587 eligible entries over the six-year period. The focus of this small case study will not be on the potential role played by the Prize in increasing awareness of the underrepresentation of women in translation. This is impossible to establish and ultimately of much less interest than other issues hinted at by the statistics gathered under the auspices of the Prize. Rather, in reviewing the statistics and in conducting a small-scale survey of the translators who were shortlisted for the Prize between 2017 and 2022, we were curious to see whether it would be possible to:

- analyse the relationship between the submissions and the shortlist from the perspective of quantifiable bibliodiversity beyond gender; in other words, all of the submissions are authored by women, but how does source language factor in?
- identity the major forces or agents involved in bringing a translated work to publication in English, particularly where a work enjoys a certain level of success such as being shortlisted for the WPWiT; come to some

[3] On the background to the establishment of the prize, see, for example, Anderson (2013), Bernofsky (2014), Derbyshire (2014), Jaquette (2016), Cain (2017). Women in Translation month was established by Meytal Radzinski in 2014. See Radzinski's Women in Translation website (*WiT* 2023) for detailed statistics and further background.

[4] These statistics are freely accessible at the WPWiT website. An error found in the Warwick statistics has been corrected for the purposes of this paper: this was a title translated from German that was submitted both in 2020 and 2021 and listed twice; the double listing likely implies that the title was not eligible in 2020 on the basis of its publication date and was re-entered for the prize in the following year. This brings the total number of entries down from the official count of 588 to 587.

conclusions about the relationship between these forces and agents and bibliodiversity.

2.2. Analysing the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation statistics

Table 1 in the Annexes shows the total number of entries by source language, the percentage of total entries by source language, the total number of shortlisted entries by source language, and the percentage of the combined shortlists by source language. Table 2 in the Annexes shows the number of entries divided into European and non-European languages.[5] Both the label *source language* and the division into European and non-European languages necessarily lack nuance (and do not take account of less quantifiable characteristics such as the author's sexuality, race, class, age, and so on) but nonetheless serve as a rough barometer of publishing trends.[6] It goes without saying or resorting to a footnote that categorisation by source language hides a multiplicity of complexities ranging from the gazumping character of former colonial languages, through the realities of exophonic and diasporic lives, to the nature of metropolitan publishing. The language in which a book is written, be it French, Spanish, Chinese, or indeed German, cannot automatically entail an assumption about an author's cultural or linguistic origins, the past or current geographical centre of their life, nor about the geographical focus of their work.[7] That said, what we can see from the statistics is that French, German, Spanish and Swedish account for 44.26% of entries to the prize and that Western European languages dominate submissions at around 80%. By contrast, Chinese, Japanese and Korean account for only 10.89% of entries and non-European languages overall account for only just under 20%. All languages other than the 'big European four' submitted fewer than 30 entries each in total over the six years. The list of entries undoubtedly reveals a

[5] The languages identified as non-European for the purposes of this analysis are: Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Bangla, Bengali, Chinese, Farsi, Georgian, Hebrew, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Kyrgyz, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tigrinya, Turkish, and Urdu.

[6] As Olga Castro and Helen Vassallo note, "the geopolitics of women's writing is just one aspect of diversity […] we must remember all the different social categories (such as race, class, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual identity, etc.) that intersect with gender to create intertwined systems of privilege and discrimination" (Castro, Vassallo 2020, p. 139).

[7] It was not possible, within the framework of this short-term research project, to nuance the WPWiT statistics to reflect these kinds of complexities. However, a brief look at the questionnaires completed for 18 of the 40 titles on the shortlists hints at this complexity: *The House with the Stained-Glass Window* is a book written in Polish by a Ukrainian; the author of *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* is Japanese but writes in German; author Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Rwanda but writes in French; writer Yan Ge writes in Chinese but lives in Ireland.

Eurocentric bias in UK and Irish literature-in-translation:[8] with a few exceptions, the further east and south of Western Europe one travels, the smaller the level of representation in translation.

Analysis of the shortlists in terms of their relationship to the breakdown of entries by language shows that French and Spanish underperform on the shortlists given their dominance of the submissions. German overperforms, as does Polish – quite significantly. Six out of a modest total of ten Polish competition entries found their way onto the shortlists. Certain languages with large numbers of overall entries – Dutch, Norwegian, Danish – are notable by their complete absence from the shortlists. Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, Greek, Hindi, Irish and Russian all have fewer than 20 entries each across the six years; all "overperform" on the shortlists given this small pool of titles. Arabic, Italian, Japanese and Korean all "underperform" in relation to their pool of entries.

Consideration of other features of the shortlists reveals that independent publishers are in the absolute majority whereas imprints of large publishing conglomerates barely feature. Four translators appear more than once on the shortlists; Polish to English translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones is the most shortlisted translator with three separate titles. German is the most represented language on the shortlists. Titles translated from European languages account for 80% of the shortlists; titles from non-European languages account for 20%. In this respect, the Eurocentric bias of the shortlists exactly reflects the dominance of European languages on the level of submissions.

The questionnaires sent to the shortlisted translators took account of these observations and attempted to probe certain hypotheses. Though it is generally assumed within the literary translation community that independent publishers are more interested in literature-in-translation and in bibliodiversity than other types of publishers, does this imply active commissioning or rather receptivity? Who was responsible for bringing the Women in Translation-shortlisted titles to publication? Given the presence of these independent publishers on the shortlists and given the dominance of books from languages that have an active system of state cultural support, is it possible to identify the role of subventions in the success of translated titles? What can we read into the recurrence of certain translators on the lists? How invested are translators in bibliodiversity?

[8] The Prize is not open to publishers based outside the UK and Ireland. This was mainly motivated by an inverse economy of scale: initially it was unclear whether making North American publishers eligible would overwhelm the infrastructure of a small-scale Prize with both a modest budget and level of staffing. The reality of global Anglophone publishing, however, means that many titles appear on both sides of the Atlantic in different imprints and that titles from small publishing houses based outside the main publishing centres, e.g. V&Q Books in Berlin, are unfortunately excluded.

Shortlisted translators were asked a series of questions aimed at establishing their career stage, their role in bringing the shortlisted title to publication, whether the title received any financial, promotional or other support pre- or post-publication, or had been nominated or won any other prizes, either in the source language or in translation, and the extent to which bibliodiversity had featured in the translator's decision to translate the book. The term *bibliodiversity* was left deliberately undefined in the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were received for 18 of 39 titles, representing 15 translators, so the statistical sample is small.[9] Nonetheless, the questionnaires reveal some interesting trends and suggest avenues for fruitful lines of enquiry with larger data samples.

The questionnaires show that eight of the responding translators self-describe as 'established' or 'experienced', two as mid-career, and five as either early career or emerging.[10] Ten of the shortlisted titles had been pitched by translators to publishers; four of the titles had been commissioned; four titles fell into a different category where factors such as personal relationships and the simultaneous efforts of multiple parties were decisive. Ten of eighteen titles received some kind of financial support, either in the form of support for a sample translation – types of actors specifically mentioned here include source-language publishers, English PEN and the PEN/Heim grants – or in the form of translation subventions to Anglophone publishers from national cultural institutions – specific mention was made of the Goethe Institut, the Polish Book Institute, the Finnish Literature Exchange and the Institut Ramon Llull – or in one case by a private individual. Ten of the shortlisted titles were the recipients of other honours at home or abroad, either pre- or post-publication of the translation, whereas eight were not. The responses to the open question on bibliodiversity were intriguing: only six respondents discussed the fact that their translated title was written by a woman. The majority of respondents defined or understood bibliodiversity in terms of language or geography, namely, their decision to translate was motivated primarily or in the main by the underrepresentation of the language and/or region from which they were translating, rather than by gender or other forms of diversity: a comment such as "I consider any translations from Language Y to add to Anglophone literature's bibliodiversity" was fairly typical. Many translators also stated that their relationship to the book in question was a significant factor, commenting variously that "I simply fell in love with the vivid writing style"; "what truly

[9] One title on the shortlist, *The Coast Road*, was omitted from the questionnaires as it was a collection of poetry with multiple translators. Three further titles on the shortlist were co-translated: in one case both translators were asked to respond jointly; in two cases only one translator was asked to respond.

[10] Some translators felt that their career stage had shifted between the time of shortlisting and the present day. Unfortunately, the question about career stage did not specify whether it was asking for career stage at time of shortlisting or at present; this question would need to be more precise in future research.

mattered to me was working on a book that I would find engaging as a translator"; "I look only for quality"; "My main motivation was that I love the complex, emotional weirdness of Author B's writing"; "basically I liked the story and the way she wrote it"; and "Just picked her because her work blew my mind".

What might we conclude from the statistics and from the questionnaires? Firstly, it is important to delineate the sphere of influence of the WPWiT. The Prize is not responsible for the number and type of entries made to the competition. The 'big European four' dominate the entries and this domination clearly translates to the shortlists, but even within this group the transfer of influence is not straightforwardly representative. It is at the longlisting and shortlisting stages that the tastes and 'biases' of the judging panel come into play. The shortlists are undoubtedly skewed towards European languages, but the analysis above shows that the under- and over-performance of certain languages paints a complex picture. The questionnaires underline the fact that the role of translators in pitching and selling titles cannot be underestimated. The majority of the translators interviewed self-describe as experienced; the recurrence of certain translators may suggest translational 'talent', a good nose for which titles will succeed on the market,[11] and/or name recognition of translators on the part of the judges. The translation market clearly relies quite heavily on a system of subventions for its success but the questionnaires reveal that financial support is not always a decisive factor in the success of a title. What is striking is that the shortlisted translators are largely interested in translating stories that they like and championing 'their' language rather than in other forms of bibliodiversity. For those translating from underrepresented languages, which in the Anglophone world implies anything from Hungarian to Indonesian, intersectional bibliodiversity is simply a happy by-product of managing to see a translation through to publication.

If, as the questionnaires unsurprisingly suggest, translators in the UK and Ireland are instrumental in getting non-Anglophone literature published in translation, the question of who these translators are and how they came to acquire their languages is key. The dominance of the big European four must reflect the fact that French, German and Spanish have traditionally been the most-taught languages in UK and Irish schools and are the languages of the isles' largest neighbours to the West. Swedish falls out of this supposition: Scandinavian languages are not typically taught in schools, though Scandinavian literature and culture – from noir to hygge – have been fashionable in the English-speaking world for some decades. Conversely, we might assume that rarer languages rely on heritage speakers, L2 translators, or on L1 translators whose personal history has brought them into contact with a

[11] It should be noted here that the market does not always know what it wants or needs. One translator noted that a title by an author who went on to enjoy global success was pitched for 10 years before finding a home.

language not acquired through formal education.[12] If translated literature is to become more diverse, we need more translators of underrepresented languages, and this means more translators from these three categories. This is where initiatives need to focus their efforts, and this is precisely where PEN Presents steps in.

3. PEN Presents: shifting the landscape of literature in translation

3.1. An agent-based approach to bibliodiversity

PEN Presents is a digital platform that aims to shift the landscape of translated literature in the UK. Applications are invited twice a year for an issue showcasing and funding sample translations of work as yet unpublished in English; each year one issue has a specific focus in terms of geographical region, language or other characteristic, and the other is an 'open call' round.[13] Prior to the launch of PEN Presents, English PEN undertook extensive consultation with publishers, translators, agents, scouts, festival organisers and other stakeholders to determine what the obstacles were to commissioning a greater diversity of literature in translation, and what stakeholders considered to be the priorities in challenging these obstacles. A primary outcome of this research and development phase was the importance of *discoverability* as a significant obstacle to greater diversity in translated literature: publishers noted the challenge of finding non-mainstream authors and books; agents and scouts observed an uneven distribution of infrastructure in terms of geographic context; translators expressed the difficulty of presenting work where there were not established channels to editors. All stakeholders stressed the importance of sample translations in pitching and acquiring translated literature, confirming the need for an intervention such as PEN Presents.

This research builds on outcomes of the 2011 Global Translation Initiative (GTI),[14] a collaboration between stakeholders in the publishing industry whose findings indicated the need to undertake targeted research into barriers facing specific languages and regions. The GTI found that obstacles throughout the chain of production come from perceptions of the different 'groups' of stakeholders, and also highlighted a chronic lack of funding for translated literature. This broad conclusion has more specific implications

[12] See Collischonn (2023) on the phenomenon of literary translation by L2 translators.

[13] Issue 1 focused on the languages of India and was delivered by English PEN in collaboration with the British Council. Issue 2 was an 'open call' volume, delivered by English PEN in collaboration with Vassallo via funding from the University of Exeter's Open Innovation Platform, and a network grant awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

[14] For the report, see Dalkey Archive Press (2011).

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revealed by our research: uneven distribution of financial support across languages and geographic contexts has a significant impact on the kinds of literature(s) made available in translation (see Forrester in Schnee 2023), and on who these literatures represent. This indicates a direct correlation between lack of funding in source cultures and lack of diversity in translation, a finding upheld by recent reports by the British Council on literature translated from languages of India (Murray, Dhanwani, Ramalingam 2022) and by Highlight Arts on literature translated from Arabic (Fayed, Guthrie, Halls 2021).[15]

Two further (and related) outcomes emerged from the consultation: firstly, that funding the labour of sample translations is vital to increase accessibility to the literary translation community; secondly, that stakeholders from across the sector identify lack of communication channels as an impediment to bibliodiversity. The first point highlights one of the fundamental problems in terms of diversity within translated literature: commissioning editors and agents are unlikely to purchase rights for a book if they cannot read a sample,[16] and yet the nature of creating a sample means that it occurs pre-commission, and therefore equates to unpaid labour. This immediately privileges those who might be in a more stable financial position, compounding an existing assumption on the part of stakeholders throughout the chain of production, and highlighted by Gitanjali Patel and Nariman Youssef in their statement that "[t]ranslators are presumed to be white. Their English that of the educated middle classes" (Patel, Youssef 2022, p.17). This assumption was challenged in the first round of PEN Presents, during which feedback from the selection panel included the imperative to ensure that outreach for the calls should include – and, if possible, deliberately target – L2 translators, or individuals who might not consider themselves translators (such as those working with heritage languages, or those yet to secure their first publishing contract). The commitment to do so going forward consciously engages with the issue of literary translation as a primarily white and middle-class field, avoiding the kind of tokenistic commitment to diversity that Patel and Youssef critique (pp. 22-23), which in reality others and erases translators of colour.[17]

[15] This is further corroborated by Megan Clarke's research (2022), in which she also points to the importance of funding for smaller publishing houses. It also problematises the correlation between subvention and success noted in the previous section, as it immediately creates inequalities between literary cultures.

[16] It is not enough here to point to bilingual commissioning editors as a solution: even those who are bilingual are likely to have a more mainstream language as their second language, and even if this is not the case, it still limits the potential commission to books in the language(s) in which they are proficient.

[17] Kavita Bhanot has problematised eloquently this over-simplification of complex diversity issues in her landmark essay "Decolonise, not Diversify" (Bhanot 2015). Bhanot points to the damage that can be done if 'diversity' is reduced to a box-ticking initiative that deals only with the superficial aspects of the problem in terms of representation, rather than a fundamental shift in the

This focus on people – who is included in the literary translation community, and who is excluded from it – connects to the second point emerging from the research and development phase for PEN Presents: the lack of communication channels between different stakeholders, and the importance of fostering dialogue at an earlier stage in the chain of commission and production. This confirms the findings of a recent research project by Megan Clarke, which highlighted the absence of brokers between independent foreign publishers and their Anglophone counterparts as a significant impediment to diversity in translated literature (see Clarke 2022). Our research showed that this is also true of the lack of intermediaries between publishers and translators, or translators and agents. All those interviewed as part of our scoping project emphasised the importance of dialogue and outreach in the response to these challenges, in order to secure a more diverse representation of territories and voices and greater support for translated work emerging from contexts without existing pathways to international funding and distribution.[18] PEN Presents thus functions as the intermediary or 'broker' that Clarke identifies as essential for greater diversity, and begins to respond to the absence of communication channels noted by stakeholders. Crucially, it also addresses the question of inclusion, as the outreach for the programme actively attempts to reach people not currently part of existing networks, drawing on PEN's global partners to gain access to translators outside the UK system. In an interview at the time of the shortlist announcement for the second round of PEN Presents, English PEN's Translation and International Manager Will Forrester spoke of the possible contributions of the programme in the following way:

> The freedoms to read and write provoke the questions *Who gets to read? Who gets to write?* and therefore *Who gets to translate? Who gets to be translated?* Addressing the structural barriers and inequities that are at the bottom of these prompts is a part of promoting such freedoms, and of recognizing that they are only thoroughgoing freedoms if they are equal freedoms for all. (Forrester in Schnee 2023)

Addressing the "structural barriers and inequities" evoked by Forrester acts against the superficial diversity initiatives critiqued by Bhanot and by Patel and Youssef. The notion of "equal freedoms for all" underpins the ethos of PEN Presents and our research collaboration: not only does it underline the importance of individuals within systems, but also it reinforces the notion that

way that we think. However, it will be equally important to bear in mind that 'white' and 'middle-class' are separate categories of privilege (which can of course coincide), and that it should not be assumed that all white translators are middle-class and all translators of colour underprivileged – this would result in a different but no less damaging over-simplification of diversity issues.

[18] This means extending networks beyond their existing form, so that the potential openness of a network does not end up ensuring its 'closedness' to those who are not already part of it. For further discussion of the need to avoid complacency in existing networks, see Vassallo (2022, pp. 97-119).

equality is about more than a box-ticking inclusivity exercise, and that for systems to change then the people within them need to change. As Bhanot (2015) opines, "[t]he concept of diversity only exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which 'others' are 'diverse'": it is crucial, then, that the emphasis on bibliodiversity should distance itself from the idea that there is a 'neutral' yardstick by which a text's diversity can or should be measured (whether this is in terms of subject matter or, as Patel and Youssef note, the kind of English(es) used to translate it). An active focus on "equal freedoms for all" also responds to a problem highlighted by Patel and Youssef, who assert that

> [m]igrating across linguistic and cultural borders means the translated text faces the same challenges as the migrant person in a new land: lack of belonging, pressure to assimilate, threats of erasure. It depends on where the text is migrating from. Some may find it easier to enter, easier to blend in. Other texts are held at the border and forced to prove their worth. (Patel, Youssef 2022, p. 26)

By likening the movement of texts to the movement of bodies,[19] Patel and Youssef point to the importance of individuals and the systems within which they operate in both preventing and allowing books, and their authors and translators, to cross from one context to another. It is this deeply embedded unconscious bias, disguised as a benevolent neutrality, that must be undone for real change to occur.

3.2. Undoing unconscious bias: the geopolitics of 'fitting in'

A key consideration of any move to implement diversity is to examine and challenge unconscious bias as well as more obvious forms of bias.[20] A useful way to approach this in the context of commissioning more diverse books is by analysing obstacles to their commission. At a panel in the Literary Translation Centre of London Book Fair 2023,[21] commissioning editor Lisette Verhagen reiterated the crucial role of a sample in acquiring books, noting that a sample of around 7,000 words would be ideal for an editor to get a sense of the book. This ties in with the issues noted above regarding unpaid labour – at Translators Association observed rates, this equates to over £700 of labour. Even if a translator is in a position to carry out this labour – an essential part of securing a contract, and so an essential part of getting a foothold in the

[19] For further development of this topic, see Mounzer (2017).

[20] For an in-depth examination of unconscious gender bias, see Vassallo (2022, pp. 1-21). For further insight into how racial bias is manifest in the translated literature sector of the publishing industry, a field dominated by "middle-class whiteness" (Bhanot, Tiang 2022, p. 8), see Patel, Youssef (2022) and Hur (2022). For an account of how gender and racial bias intersect in attitudes towards translation and translated literature, see Hussain (2022).

[21] "Creating Samples and Getting Projects Acquired" (London Book Fair, 18 April 2023).

profession – choosing a more risky or challenging text might offer less security in terms of receiving a positive response from publishers, and so this becomes another way in which more mainstream texts remain dominant through the structures that promote them and prop them up. One stakeholder commenting on a shortlisted text for the second round of PEN Presents wondered where it would be placed in a bookshop: while it is entirely understandable that commissioning editors would think about the market for the book – publishing houses are, after all, businesses, and businesses need to break even in order to survive – rejecting a book based on whether or not it 'fits' can only perpetuate the same landscape. If a book that has no obvious place is rejected on the basis that it does not resemble other books that are more marketable, then we create a situation where the supply of those same marketable books creates a false demand, concretising the dominant voices, and churning out "more of the same".[22]

These vicious circles of marginalisation and exclusion exemplify three related trends that have recently been criticised by translators. Firstly, Nicholas Glastonbury expresses frustration with the publishers' clichéd response of "there's no market for this book", as if publishers themselves do not have a role in the creation of a market. He describes the impossible situation for marginalised literatures as follows:

> Publishers often chalk up these quotas[23] to lack of demand or lack of interest, as if demand itself isn't a tautological red herring: there is no demand for literature in certain languages, so such books don't get published, and because these books don't get published, there is no demand for others like them. (Glastonbury 2021)[24]

[22] To address this issue and ensure that PEN Presents does not replicate such systems, a robust process has been implemented. The applications are sifted internally for eligibility, and then sent to members of the selection panel. The panel is a rotating group of seven individuals, drawn from across the literary sector and representing a range of experience and backgrounds. They select a shortlist of twelve proposals, assessing applications according to three main criteria (literary quality, strength of the proposal, and contribution to bibliodiversity). Shortlisted translators are awarded a grant to create a 5,000-word sample translation of the proposed work. The samples are assessed by readers of the source language and sent to the panel along with the reader reports. The panel then selects six samples from the shortlist as PEN Presents winners, to be showcased on the platform and promoted to publishers. The same assessment criteria apply, alongside a commitment to ensure a balanced portfolio of proposals meeting these criteria: the panel is explicitly asked to consider the diversity of forms, themes and voices represented across the shortlist and the selected samples.

[23] The 'quotas' to which Glastonbury refers here are typical responses of the 'we already have a Turkish author on our books' kind. Such attitudes reduce entire cultures to one book, a tokenism perilously disguised as progress.

[24] Megan Clarke indicates that this is connected to a lack of communication between different groups of stakeholders, noting that one of her key findings was that "one of the roadblocks was a lack of communication between sectors and departments. This led decision-makers to act on often inaccurate assumptions about the market and other players in the translation process" (Clarke 2022). Greater communication and expanded networks are, therefore, key to greater diversity.

Secondly, Anton Hur deconstructs the notion of the 'mythical English reader', a figure meant to represent the target market and harnessed by publishers and editors to reject pitches (echoing Glastonbury's experience) or to insist on domesticating or familiarising edits to the translated text. However, the 'actual' reader appears to be in direct opposition to this 'mythical English reader', which is little more than the artificial construct of a supposedly neutral perspective that is in reality violently mainstream. Megan Clarke's study of readers in the context of literature translated from Spanish found that the obstacles to greater diversity were not related to reader complacency, "disprov[ing] assumptions that UK book buyers are not interested in translated fiction" (Clarke 2022). This outcome is upheld by a recent survey carried out by Nielsen Books for the Booker Prize Foundation, which found that readers of translated fiction welcomed a "challenging read" and enjoyed reading "for information or knowledge" (The Booker Prizes 2023). This indicates an openness to remake existing ideas,[25] yet the 'mythical English reader' still serves as a harmful justification for rejecting more diverse books. As Patel and Youssef explain, "[t]he assumed readers that publishers cater for are undemanding and risk-averse. […] Demands are made on behalf of these 'core readers' with little interrogation of the underlying assumptions about who they are and *who else is being excluded as a result*" (Patel, Youssef, 2022, p. 28, emphasis added).[26] The survey of 'actual' readers is in direct contrast to the 'mythical' reader(s) that pose a barrier to diversity, indicating a deep-rooted bias within the chain of commission and production.[27]

This use of deferral in selecting or rejecting texts relates to the third criticism, from Madhu Kaza, that a book might be rejected on the basis that it is 'not a good fit'. Kaza writes that this term is used in publishing and employment to justify exclusions that may indicate deeper problems with bias, and opines that "[i]t's not difficult to recognise this lazy phrase as a cover for

[25] The survey (which drew on a control group of 3,000) also found that in 2022 male readers read more translated fiction than general fiction, though women bought marginally more translated literature than men (52% of translated fiction was purchased by women, as opposed to 48% by men).

[26] This was already identified as a problem in 2011, when the GTI found that "speculation about the 'interests of readers' has rarely been to the advantage of literary translation. Yet responses from booksellers, who have the most direct contact with readers, suggest that the actual reader bias against literary translation is minimal, and that lack of awareness, rather than active bias, is a more accurate description of the relationship of readers to translated works" (Dalkey Archive Press 2011, p. 55). The more recent research from the Booker Prize Foundation in collaboration with Nielsen BookData corroborates this, indicating an openness on the part of readers that is closed down early on in the commissioning process.

[27] It is also worth considering here the importance of English as a 'gateway' language, and the power that choices about which books to commission in translation has beyond Anglophone contexts: this can be manifest in the sense of rights being sold for translation into other languages based on a translation into English, or on circulation of texts translated into English among L2 readers of English outside Anglophone contexts.

unexamined bias. What does it mean? What is the phrase doing as a speech act other than closing the door with a feigned politeness and no explanation?" (Kaza 2022, p. 311). Kaza's comments call to mind both specific experiences denounced by Glastonbury – "The editor wrote, 'I don't even have a critique to give. But, simply put, I just don't know how to publish this book, which, as great as it sounds, feels just too small for us'" (Glastonbury in Hur 2021) – and the more general call by Dryden to "publish beyond bias" (Dryden 2021), indicating that each of us props up a biased structure every day through multiple unconscious acts. Glastonbury's experience is an example of what Dryden critiques as "the damaging narratives and 'normal' decision-making parameters that exclude so many" in the publishing industry (Dryden 2021):[28] in this case, the book is dismissed because it was not originally written in a 'big language', making it 'too small' – a dangerous dismissal of region, language and content that shows how deeply linguistic and geopolitical bias are entrenched in the industry. Dryden's emphasis on 'normal' decision-making parameters also chimes with both Kaza's indictment of the term 'not a good fit' and Bhanot's of the superficiality of diversity initiatives that encourage the "diverse" individuals to slot into a system not designed with them in mind. Doors are closed to writers, translators and their texts because they do not 'fit' with an unquestioned archetype of what constitutes 'normal', and so their exclusion is compounded: they can only 'fit' if they adapt to a system that does not accommodate them.

With its focus on non-mainstream voices, regions and authors, and by harnessing PEN's global network to reach (1) publishers and communities who do not have established channels of communication to the UK system and (2) translators without established access to publishers and commissioning editors, PEN Presents offers an active response both to this exclusion and to the absence of brokers between independent foreign publishers and their Anglophone counterparts that Clarke (2022) recognises as a barrier to diversity in translated literature. Indeed, Forrester explicitly refers to this lack of communication channels as a "knot in the chain" (Forrester in Schnee 2023), confirming that obstacles to communication were a key reason for developing the PEN Presents programme. He notes of the PEN Translates grant programme (an annual competition that offers funding for the translation of books already commissioned by publishers) that "though we were expressly welcoming titles from acutely underrepresented languages and regions, we weren't receiving these submissions from publishers, because publishers weren't seeing these books in the first place" (Forrester in Schnee 2023).

[28] Glastonbury also wonders what a 'perfect' pitch system would look like, asking the question "What if our pitches were entitled to some amount of money from the publishers who solicit them or from organizations we might belong to, like PEN or ALTA?" (Glastonbury in Hur 2021). PEN Presents goes some way towards addressing this through its funding of translation samples and its function as intermediary between translators and publishers.

Intervening at an earlier point in the chain of production thus offers an opportunity to balance out this bias, and making PEN Presents a translator-led initiative recognises the unique positioning of translators as advocates and readers: Forrester explains that while concrete information regarding a book's success in its original context is powerful, "so is thoughtfulness and championing and heart" (Forrester in Schnee 2023). For this reason, the application form for the second round of PEN Presents shifted focus away from translator biographies and/or CVs, and instead asked applicants to explain why they were passionate about the book they were proposing, and why they were the right person to translate it.[29] This focus on people rather than commercial or critical success had encouraging results: the call received 125 proposals for work originally written in 51 different languages (and from 53 countries) – a spread almost as linguistically and culturally diverse as 6 years of entries to the WPWiT. The majority was literary fiction, which indicates that there is work to be done in terms of encouraging diversity of genre, but there were nonetheless submissions representing genre fiction, creative non-fiction, travel writing, poetry, YA and children's literature, and graphic novels.

In terms of the people applying, a range of translators from across the world submitted proposals, with a significant proportion of applications from heritage translators, bilingual translators, and translators of colour. This is particularly important both for bibliodiversity and for the development of the new subdiscipline of feminist translator studies outlined by Vassallo (2022). Firstly, it breaks the pattern of superficial diversity initiatives, which Bhanot suggests usually involve "reaching out for the handful of well-known names, writers, organisations that immediately come to mind, promoting them or asking them for advice and recommendations" (Bhanot 2015).[30] Instead, PEN Presents reaches out for the names we do not yet know, altering its questions to encourage those 'outside' the system to apply.[31] Secondly, although this initiative is not specifically focused on gender, it advances Vassallo's blueprint for feminist translator studies, in its engagement with her assertion that this field is "concerned with how translations occur and how we can change for the better the processes and practices that bring translated literature into circulation" (Vassallo 2022, p. 147). In the final selection of seven translation

[29] This also allows translators to offer additional information about their own background, if they wish to do so, thereby potentially generating more data about the intersecting social characteristics that can be privileged or marginalised.

[30] This phenomenon is related to literature in translation when considered in the light of Glastonbury's comments on the difficulties of pitching less well-known authors, as he laments that "Why should Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, talented though they are, be the be-all and end-all of Turkish literature in translation?" (Glastonbury in Hur 2022).

[31] This engages with Patel and Youssef's concerns about who is excluded from the decision-making processes regarding the commission of literature in translation (Patel, Youssef 2022, p. 28).

samples for the second issue of PEN Presents,[32] none of the entries were from Europe – a region that traditionally dominates the publication of literature in translation, see Anderson (2019) and Flood (2019) – and only two were from European languages.[33] Through each stage of the selection process, the geographical and linguistic diversity increased, as did the textual focus on non-normative social groups in terms of sexuality, age and class. This shows incontrovertibly that non-mainstream books do exist in every culture, and their place in the final selection demonstrates that they are of excellent quality. The results thus not only break down harmful assumptions that prop up unequal structures, but also directly address the issue of 'discoverability': if these books are not getting to publishers, an initiative such as PEN Presents offers a means to broker those connections. Intervening at this earlier stage in the chain of production also offers an opportunity to do more than passively reflect inequalities elsewhere, as prize long- and shortlists often do.

4. Conclusions: equal freedoms for all?

The research collaboration with English PEN, and the resultant funding of the open call issue of PEN Presents, offers a model of bridging academic research and the creative industries via an agent-based approach. It responds to the absence of brokers noted by Clarke, to the importance of opening up networks identified by all of the stakeholders interviewed during the research and development phase, and to the need to tackle fundamental rather than superficial manifestations of inequality highlighted by Bhanot and Dryden with regards to publishing in general, and by Glastonbury, Hur, and Patel and Youssef in the context of translated literature more specifically. Hur concludes that

> if we want to change the way our translations are published, the way to do it is not only through individual action but through changing the entire landscape of publishing. […] there are still so many ways to identify the cracks in the system that we can shove a wedge into or the points of leverage we can place a fulcrum upon, and it's going to take all of these little efforts and opportunities combined into a movement to make changes that will truly benefit individuals. (Hur in Bhanot and Tiang 2022, p. 81)

However, there are two important considerations to put forward in this context. Firstly, and as demonstrated above, it is important that concerns about dismantling bias do not assume the conflation of colour and class, or of any other characteristics that prioritise certain authors and translators while

[32] Though usually the shortlist will be comprised of twelve texts and the final selection of six, the quality of submissions was so high that an additional entry was selected for the second round, resulting in a shortlist of thirteen and a final volume of seven.

[33] These were a text from Cameroon, originally written in French, and one from Ecuador, originally written in Spanish.

marginalising others. Secondly, because of existing issues of unpaid labour and the barriers surrounding the commission of literature in translation, it is crucial that the work to effect these changes should not fall entirely to the translators. In this way, an initiative such as PEN Presents can be a useful model of allyship as outlined by Corine Tachtiris (2020), extending her arguments about translators as allies for marginalised authors (and specifically, in Tachtiris's analysis, for authors of colour) to show how institutions can be allies for translators – and especially marginalised translators. By using the brand and reputation of English PEN as well as its market forces and global networks not only to endorse exciting new literature in translation but also to disseminate it, voices – of both authors and translators – that might not otherwise have access to the Anglophone market can benefit from increased visibility.

Activist initiatives such as the WPWiT and PEN Presents can serve as the 'wedges' for which Hur advocates, and so it is imperative that they fulfil their true diversity potential, changing rather than reproducing the systems in which they seek to intervene. This will further the goal of feminist translator studies to "remak[e] for the better" (Vassallo 2022, p. 150). This goal is based on Dryden's proposals for a less biased publishing ecosystem, and resonates with both Bhanot's suggestion that diversity initiatives could go much further and Glastonbury's plea that publishers should be less conservative. The Eurocentric bias on the WPWiT shortlists reflects both the Eurocentric dominance of entries to the prize but also necessarily the tastes of the judging panel. PEN Presents has secured a more balanced representation and so it will be critical to monitor their progression from the PEN Presents platform through to commission and publication, and to analyse what gets commissioned and by whom.[34] Going forward, it will be important to ensure that PEN Presents is not only responding retroactively to the needs of a changing landscape, but is a fundamental part of that change: by prioritising a move away from geographical and intellectual centres and disrupting traditional models of commission and funding (see Smith 2018), the possibility emerges for a meaningful shift in the development of diversity initiatives. Because it is still only a new programme, its full impact is yet to unfold, but at this point it exemplifies Vassallo's insistence on the importance of a "de-centring" approach in feminist translator studies, encompassing both "a shift away from mainstream narratives, urban writing, and default notions of gender, sexuality and race" and a concomitant shift away from "the inward-looking nature of

[34] At the time of writing, of 13 samples promoted through the first two issues, 6 have already been acquired by publishers, and another author has been agented. This acquisition rate for a samples initiative expressly focused on publishers acquiring more diverse literature is exceptionally high compared to industry equivalents, indicating the potentially vital role that PEN Presents could play in changing the landscape of literature in translation.

seeing ourselves reflected" (Vassallo 2022, pp. 152-153).[35] Conversely, the WPWiT – which, at the time of writing, is in its seventh year – has done important work in raising awareness of the gender imbalance in translated literature, but now might need to consider how to move on from that binary basic position, potentially by sub-dividing the prize by global region. It is particularly striking that the WPWiT-shortlisted translators interviewed understood 'bibliodiversity' primarily in terms of language, whereas for translators applying to PEN Presents, a broader definition is offered explicitly both to applicants and to the selection panel.[36] It is, then, possible that adding this as a judging criterion would not only lead to greater diversity on the long- and shortlists, but also raise awareness among publishers and translators of the importance of forms of bibliodiversity that go beyond gender and source language.

For the field to truly advance, it is our contention that 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 who allow that circulation to happen or prevent it from happening. As Forrester reminds us, "when we talk about systems change, we should remember that systems are comprised of and created by individuals" (Forrester in Schnee 2023). Though translators are vital activists and advocates for bibliodiversity, accounts from Glastonbury, Kaza, Hur, and Patel and Youssef (among others) point to the power relations implicit in literary translation. Networks can remain closed, and are not inherently positive just because they exist. Rather, we need to work to ensure that they are constantly expanding, broadening the landscape of translated literature in terms of authors and texts, but also by recognising that greater inclusivity and accessibility in the translation community are fundamental to greater diversity in translated literature.

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[35] See also Kaza (2022) and Tiang (2021). The final selection represents minority communities, illegal sexualities, middle-aged and "middling" characters, and comprises themes ranging from repression, censorship, and alternative communities to fable and the Covid-19 pandemic.

[36] In this context, bibliodiversity might encompass any or all of the following: a language, country, culture, form, theme, or genre underrepresented in UK publishing; new or previously elided perspectives on existing or already-represented themes, contexts or cultures; less-heard voices – from both authors and translators whose perspectives and identities are less-represented in UK publishing. See English PEN (2022).

(including works by Darina Al Joundi and Leïla Slimani), and is the founder of the industry-facing research project Translating Women, working against intersectional gender bias in the translated literature sector of the UK publishing industry.
Chantal Wright is Co-Director of the Institute for Translation and Interpreting at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. She is the author of *Yoko Tawada's 'Portrait of a Tongue': An Experimental Translation* (University of Ottawa Press, 2013), *Literary Translation* (Routledge, 2016) and the translator-editor of *The Age of Translation* by Antoine Berman (Routledge, 2018). In 2017 she founded the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation at the University of Warwick. She translates from both German and French and is currently working on a co-translation with Simon Pare of the recently published correspondence between Ingeborg Bachmann and Max Frisch.

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Annexes

Language (in descending order of size of total entries)	Total no. of entries /587	Percentage of total entries by language	Total no. of titles per language on shortlist	Percentage of total no. of shortlisted titles /40
French	108	18.39	5	12.5
Spanish	63	10.71	2	5
German	58	9.88	7	17.5
Swedish	31	5.28	2	5
Italian	28	4.77	1	2.5
Japanese	28	4.77	1	2.5
Norwegian	25	4.25	-	-
Dutch	22	3.74	-	-
Korean	21	3.57	1	2.5
Danish	20	3.40	-	-
Arabic	18	3.06	1	2.5
Russian	17	2.89	3	7.5
Chinese	15	2.55	3	7.5
Icelandic	12	2.04	-	-
Catalan	11	1.87	1	2.5
Polish	10	1.7	6	15
Portuguese	9	1.53	-	-
Finnish	6	1.02	-	-
Croatian	5	0.85	1	2.5
Georgian	5	0.85	-	-
Hungarian	5	0.85	2	5
Latvian	5	0.85	-	-
Slovak	5	0.85	-	-
Hebrew	4	0.68	-	-
Slovenian	4	0.68	-	-
Turkish	4	0.68	-	-
Czech	3	0.51	-	-
Estonian	3	0.51	-	-
Farsi	3	0.51	1	2.5
Galician	3	0.51	-	-
Irish	3	0.51	1	2.5
Basque	2	0.34	-	-
Bengali	2	0.34	-	-
Flemish	2	0.34	-	-
Greek	2	0.34	1	2.5
Indonesian	2	0.34	-	-
Lithuanian	2	0.34	-	-
Romanian	2	0.34	-	-
Serbian	2	0.34	-	-
Tamil	2	0.34	-	-
Amharic	1	0.17	-	-
Armenian	1	0.17	-	-
Bangla	1	0.17	-	-
Belarussian	1	0.17	-	-
Bulgarian	1	0.17	-	-
Hindi	1	0.17	1	2.5
Kyrgyz	1	0.17	-	-
Macedonian	1	0.17	-	-
Maltese	1	0.17	-	-
Telugu	1	0.17	-	-
Thai	1	0.17	-	-

Tigrinya	1	0.17	-	-
Ukrainian	1	0.17	-	-
Urdu	1	0.17	-	-
Welsh	1	0.17	-	-
Total	587		40	

Table 1
WPWiT submissions and shortlists 2017-2023 by language.

Language grouping	As % of total entries	As % of shortlists
European	80.65	80
Non-European	19.22	20

Table 2
WPWiT submissions and shortlists 2017-2023 by language grouping.

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ACTIVIST TRANSLATIONS IN ITALY
A Paratextual Analysis of Five Feminist and Queer Editorial Projects

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Abstract – After being widely debated in the Anglophone world, the issue of diversity in the publishing industry has been recently introduced in Italy as well, calling for greater gender, ethnic, sexual, and class equality. As pointed out by Helen Vassallo (2023), the agents involved in the publication of a book – translators, editors, publishers – are pivotal in the promotion of inclusivity. In particular, some small publishing houses play a key role in this regard thanks to their overtly activist mission. This paper deals with a selection of small Italian activist publishers and their efforts to counteract mainstream narratives about diversity and promote intersectional feminist and queer culture on a transnational level through translation. The paratexts of five translations whose source text is already part of an activist project are analysed through Kathryn Batchelor's (2018) framework to demonstrate that they are a complementary form of activism in which the publishing industry agents can further their political and activist agendas and comment on the texts and the linguistic choices their translation required.

Keywords: activism; translation; Italian publishing houses; Black feminism; queer rights.

Nel promuovere una molteplicità di voci,
quel che si vuole, sopra ogni cosa,
è rompere col discorso autorizzato e unico,
che si pretende universale.
Si cerca qui, soprattutto, di lottare per rompere
con il regime di autorizzazione discorsiva.
(D. Ribeiro "Il luogo della parola", 2020,
It. trans., p. 49).

1. Introduction

In a world where white cisgender male authors still benefit from a larger visibility, many are the concerns about the underrepresentation of diversity in the publishing industry. One of the first denunciations in an Anglophone country was made by Zora Neale Hurston back in 1950 in *What White Publishers Won't Print*, where she claimed that in the United States stories by Black writers were not usually published and – when they were – they had to

conform to a set of stereotypes on the 'Black experience' white people wanted to read about. Although the situation has improved since then, it has not changed as much as it should have.[1]

Following the absence of Black, Asian, or other minority writers in the 2016 World Book Night list, in 2015 *The Guardian* asked 13 writers and 6 industry figures (publishers, editors, critics, etc.) the following question: "How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white?" The results of this call for action and accountability were analysed by Arifa Akbar (2017), who deemed the improvement "promising" but still insufficient. Furthermore, a 2020 *New York Times* survey of fiction books written in English between 1950 and 2018 found out that "[o]f the 7,124 books for which […] the author's race [was identified], 95 percent were written by white people" (So, Wezerek 2020). As pointed out in the Lee & Low Books survey of the same year, this is complemented by a higher percentage of white people in the publishing industry: "76 percent of publishing staff, review journal staff, and literary agents are White" (Lee & Low Books 2020).

Diversity continues to be the key word in press or academic inquiries and reports about the Anglophone publishing industry (Saha, van Lente 2020, Tager, Rosaz Shariyf 2022; see also Mann 2022, Smith 2023, Spalding 2022, Spencer 2023), but it is becoming more and more relevant in Italy as well. This paper aims to offer a glimpse into how diversity is promoted transnationally by Italian activist publishers through the use of translation and the paratext as sites of activism. In order to do so, five Italian small publishing houses were identified, and five translations were selected from their catalogues on the basis that their source texts were already part of militant projects intersecting Black feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights.[2] Prefaces, introductions, translators' or publishers' notes in the target texts offer a space where authors, editors, translators, and scholars can further comment on the topics of the books and reflect on language and the practice of translation. The paratexts – analysed according to Kathryn Batchelor's (2018) framework – are thus considered as a complementary level of activism in which the agents involved in the publishing industry acknowledge that "[t]ranslation enables [activist] groups to elaborate their alternative narratives

[1] Indeed, a similar problem surfaces in the 2020 survey *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing*: "[a]uthors of color are not only damned if they tell stories that white gatekeepers wrongly believe they've already read – they're also damned if they don't tell stereotypical stories that white publishers actually have already read and expect. Various interviewees described an authorial straitjacket whereby publishers seek to capitalize on the proven successes of writers of color, but only in a circumscribed way: If a story worked once, tell it again" (Saha, von Lente 2020, p. 43).

[2] For space constraints, this paper does not allow for a thorough discussion of these topics but limits itself to show how intersectional feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights are given visibility through activist translation.

across national and linguistic boundaries, to create an international community bound by a similar vision of the world and unhindered by linguistic frontiers" (Baker 2010, p. 40).

2. State of the art

Since the development of translation studies as a discipline, scholars have questioned the source (original) and target (derivative) text dichotomy. Rather than being 'copies' of their source texts or merely linguistic practices of meaning transfer, translations are now conceived as new and different texts and as complex – and creative – processes of mediation between cultures. The research branches of feminist and postcolonial translation studies have further emphasised the relevance of the translator's choices in the construction of the target text. In 1991, for instance, Luise von Flotow coined three strategies that can be employed by a feminist translator, who "has given herself permission to make her work visible, discuss the creative process she is engaged in, collude with and challenge the writers she translates" (von Flotow 1991, p. 74). As intersectional feminist and queer studies continue to demonstrate (see Baer, Kaindl 2018; Castro, Ergun 2017; von Flotow, Kamal 2020), supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking are ways in which translators may counteract the patriarchal and heteronormative values embedded in the source text. Moreover, within postcolonial studies it is postulated that also the non-translation of a text reveals what is (and is not) allowed to enter the target culture system (Tymoczko 2006, p. 448).

Performativity is the main property translation has in relation to activism as it acts in a specific time and place as a form of resistance against the narratives it wishes to contest. The increasing interest in the political and transformative aspect of translation has led to what Michaela Wolf (2014) defines "activist turn" in translation studies. Writing about translation and resistance, Maria Tymoczko emphasises the "potentially radical and activist edge" (2010, p. 19) that a translated text assumes in the encounter with another culture in times of peace or war – as a matter of fact, activist discourses are often interwoven with conflict narratives (see Baker 2006). Identifying the time and place in which a translation is undertaken is fundamental to understand the translator's motives and overcome the 'myth' of the translator's neutrality. In this regard, Mona Baker (2013) postulates that everyone is constantly part of and agent in the narrative they choose to stand for; hence, the act of translation "constructs cultural realities, and it does so by intervening in the processes of narration and renarration that constitutes all encounters, and that essentially construct the world for us" (Baker 2013, p. 24).

Scholarly interest in the field of activism and translation is increasing, as demonstrated by recent contributions such as the *Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism* (2020), edited by Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian, and *Towards a Feminist Translator Studies: Intersectional Activism in Translation and Publishing* (2023) by Helen Vassallo. In particular, the latter underlines the relevance of the manifold actors (translators, publishers, editors, etc.) involved in the dissemination of activist ideas through the publication of a translated text. The scholar maintains that in the Anglophone world the main agents of change are small publishing houses that actively try to counteract mainstream narratives about diversity. Moreover, as noted by Maria Tymoczko, "[a]t times activist translators amplify translated texts, providing elaborate commentaries and paratextual materials that serve as a guide for political or ideological readings" (Tymoczko 2010, p. 230). Indeed, prefaces, introductions, and notes can all be exploited to boast the political and activist agenda of those involved in the publishing industry.

3. Theoretical and methodological background

The paratext offers a space where translators (but also publishers, editors, and scholars) can "fram[e] a translation and explai[n] how it should be read, what inferences should be drawn, and what ideological import the translation has in the receptor context" (Tymoczko 2010, p. 234). Luise von Flotow includes paratextual practices among the strategies feminist translators may employ, while Chiara Elefante regards paratexts as "spazi di importanza fondamentale nel passaggio che la traduzione consente da una cultura all'altra, perché, nella loro pluralità, sono spazi ibridi, soglie che, al pari del processo traduttivo, consentono di superare il concetto stesso di frontiera"[3] (Elefante 2013, p. 11). Many translation studies scholars have taken on the analysis of the paratext as a threshold after *Seuils*, the seminal work Gérard Genette published in 1987. The French theorist, however, posits that translations are part of the paratext of their source text and that their paratexts are not 'authorial', i.e. written by the author of the (source) text, unless they are self-reflexive, i.e. they comment on the translated text. This authorial concept presents a set of problems: can the translator be considered a co-author of the target text? How much is the translator responsible for the translated text? What happens when

[3] [spaces of crucial importance in the passage from one culture to another that translation makes possible, since in their plurality paratexts are hybrid spaces, thresholds which, like the translation process itself, allow us to go beyond the very concept of frontier].

there are different prefaces or forewords written by the source text author and/or the translator?

These ambiguities have led to several revisions of Genette's paradigm within translation studies (see Armstrong 2007, Belle, Hosington 2018, Gürçağlar 2002, Kovala 1996, Smith, Wilson 2011). In particular, Kathryn Batchelor (2018) has outlined a framework that revises the five main features of Genette's model, namely 'space', 'substance', 'time', 'senders and addressees', 'functions' (Batchelor 2018, pp. 153-161). The spatial distinction regards the collocation of the paratext in relation to the text it refers to. Except for the digital and audiovisual domains, Genette's distinction between 'peritexts' (elements located in the same space as the text they refer to) and 'epitexts' (elements located outside the text they refer to) is still widely used. The substantial category deals with the mode of expression of the paratext (e.g. words or images), its medium of expression (e.g. digital or print), the medium through which the text is materialised (e.g. digital or print book), the medium through which the text is accessed (e.g. e-reading devices or paper books), the medium through which the text is discovered (e.g. search engines, websites, and catalogues). The temporal category classifies paratexts based on whether they are written in relation to the source text (pre-, with-, or post-ST) or in relation to the target text (pre-, with-, or post-TT). The 'senders and addressees' feature entails a pragmatic distinction between the writer(s) of the paratext (translators, authors, other senders) and the readers (source or target culture audiences). As for Genette's fifth feature, i.e. 'functions', Batchelor adapts Annika Rockenberger's (2014) model with minimal variations and lists the following 14 functions:

- The referential f. establishes the legal and discursive fingerprint of the work.
- The self-referential f. draws attention to the paratext itself.
- The ornamental f. serves as a decoration.
- The generic f. categorises the work and indicates its genre.
- The meta-communicative f. reflects on the conditions of mediated communication and includes either reflections on translation in general or on the translation process of the work in particular.
- The informative f. clarifies the properties of the work, reveals intentions, removes epistemic obstacles for the reader.
- The hermeneutical f. mediates relevant contexts and instructs the understanding or interpretation of the text.
- The ideological f. promotes or takes distances from a certain viewpoint.
- The evaluative f. claims or demands value and cultural significance.
- The commercial f. advertises, praises, sells, recommends other products.

- The legal f. informs about legal entitlements or establishes legal rights and obligations.
- The pedagogical f. establishes standards for behaviour.
- The instructive f. guides the reception and use of the text.
- The 'personalisation' f. applies only to interactive paratexts and temporarily adjusts their elements to personal needs.

A paratextual analysis based on Batchelor's model may focus on one or more of the above-mentioned categories and functions. Moreover, a distinction can be made between paratexts as 'metatexts', when comments on the specific translation are included, and paratexts as 'metadiscourses', when the comments are on translation in general (Batchelor 2018, pp. 151-152).

4. Case study outline

The 2020 *New York Times* inquiry about diversity in the publishing industry has impacted Italy as well. For example, in the *Giornale della Libreria* article *Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di 'diversity' in editoria* (2020), Samuele Cafasso notes that "[u]na riflessione sulla presenza di autori di etnia diversa ai vertici delle case editrici e tra gli scrittori non è stata ancora avviata in larga scala nel nostro Paese"[4]. Such reflection, he adds, should not only focus on ethnicity but also include gender disparity. Indeed, the 2020-2022 reports by the Italian Publishers Association (AIE – Associazione Italiana Editori) on the status of the Italian publishing industry and by the Statistics National Institute (ISTAT – Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) on book reading and production[5] mention neither the gender nor the ethnicity of the authors and the agents in the industry. The AIE reports[6] are not concerned with translation, while the ISTAT ones[7] show that in 2020 more than 1/3 of young adult books (34.8%) were translated from a foreign language, mostly English (20.0%), while the percentage of translated texts was lower for the miscellaneous category (16.3%). In 2021 the data were similar: almost 1/3 of young adult books (31.4%) were translated from a foreign language, mostly English (15.7%) and French (8.4%), with a lower percentage in the miscellaneous section (17.9%). The same information is not available in the 2022 report. The reason for the major incidence of translations in the young

[4] [in our country, a reflection on the presence of authors from different ethnic backgrounds at the top of the publishing industry and among writers has not been started on a large scale yet].
[5] As of January 2024, the data for 2023 are not available, except for a glimpse into the first nine months included in the AIE 2022 report.
[6] See AIE 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b.
[7] See ISTAT 2022a, 2022b, 2023.

adult category may be related to the demographic gap in the reading habits of Italians, as females between the age of 11 and 24 are the most avid readers. Moreover, the 2018 report by the Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters (AITI – Associazione Italiana Traduttori e Interpreti)[8] shows that Italian translators (and interpreters) are also chiefly women (85.95%).

Although there are data on the gender of readers and translators, there do not seem to be reports on the gender and ethnicity of authors and other agents in the industry. Nonetheless, many small publishing houses are putting marginalised voices at the centre of discourse and urging for a more diverse industry. The ISTAT reports present an increasing number of 'micro-publishers' (with a circulation of 5,000 copies maximum) and 'small publishers' (with a circulation between 5,001 and 10,000 copies maximum).[9] Its 2020 report also signals that micro- and small publishers display a greater thematic specialisation and target a selected set of readers. Small and micro-publishing houses are often the main promoters of activist ideas. Among them, five are exemplificatory for their social commitment to foster gender equality, inclusivity, and intersectionality: Settenove, Somara! Edizioni, Capovolte, Asterisco Edizioni, and Le Plurali.

Founded in 2013 by Monica Martinelli, Settenove is "il primo progetto editoriale italiano interamente dedicato alla prevenzione della discriminazione e della violenza di genere"[10] (Settenove n.d.). Specialising in children literature and young adult books, the publisher aims to fight against stereotypes by educating children and getting women *and* men involved in the project. The name, literally 'Seven nine', refers to the year 1979, when the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Loredana Rotondo, Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Rony Daopulo, Paola De Martis and Annabella Miscuglio's *Processo per stupro* (*A Trial for Rape*) was broadcast by RAI, the Italian public broadcasting service, and the Chamber of Deputies elected its first woman president, Nilde Iotti.

The Sentieri Sterrati association launched Somara! Edizioni in 2018 as their own editorial project. Its ironic name was inspired by Virginia Woolf's affectionate nickname for Vita Sackville West (Somara! Edizioni 2024). The non-profit publishing house follows the association's aim of spreading both past and present stories and works by women who have been silenced and

[8] The 2018 AITI report covers the 2014-2018 period (see AITI 2018). As of January 2024, the 2023 report (including the 2019-2023 period) has not been published yet.

[9] According to the report, the percentage of 'micro-publishers' was 53.0% in 2020, 53.4% in 2021, and 51.7% in 2022. In the case of 'small publishers', it was 38.1% in 2020, 37.4% in 2021, and 39.4% in 2022.

[10] [the first Italian editorial project entirely devoted to the prevention of gender violence and discrimination].

erased from the pages of history, mainly through the translation of unpublished works (Sentieri Sterrati 2024).

Capovolte and Asterisco Edizioni were founded in 2019, the former by Ilaria Leccardi and the latter by Marta Capesciotti, Marta Cotta Ramosino, and Mauro Muscio. Capovolte is an overtly anti-racist and transfeminist publisher (Capovolte 2019a), originating from Leccardi's experience as an activist writer and her wish to publish stories about and for women (Affricot 2020). The editorial collective of Asterisco Edizioni stems from intersectional feminism and includes works on gender, sexuality, and education. They accept and encourage external suggestions in order to find out-of-catalogue and untranslated texts (Asterisco Edizioni 2024b). Similarly, Beatrice Gnassi, Clara Stella, Hanna Suni, and Valentina Torrini founded Le Plurali with four key concepts in mind: feminism, independence, intersectionality, and curiosity. Their manifesto states that they publish only women's works, especially those unpublished and untranslated in Italy (Le Plurali n.d.).

Translation seems to play a primary role for each of these publishers. On their websites, Settenove often mentions international books, while Somara! Edizioni, Asterisco Edizioni, and Le Plurali refer more specifically to translation and untranslated texts. The percentage of translations in their catalogues is 23.26%, 33.33%, 19.35%, and 35.29% respectively. Capovolte, the only publisher whose website does not provide any indications about translated texts, has the highest percentage with 40.00%.[11] For these publishing houses, translation is indeed a tool to convey and spread the ideas they promote.

5. Paratextual analysis

Two main criteria were outlined in the selection of the translations analysed in this section: 1) they must display some sort of metatextual comment; 2) their source texts must be part of a militant project, offering as such a double level of activism between the publishers of both source and target texts. As of January 2024, two translations by Capovolte and three by Asterisco Edizioni have met these criteria. The former deal with Black feminism, while the latter with LGBTQIA+ rights. By sharing the same values of inclusivity and intersectionality, Capovolte and Asterisco Edizioni truly embody the idea that "small presses are pioneers for activism in translation" (Castro, Vassallo 2020, p. 428).

The following paratextual analysis takes into account Batchelor's (2018) temporal and pragmatic categories and functions. For what concerns

[11] The percentages here reported refer to the catalogues as of January 2024.

'space', each paratext is a peritext. As for 'substance', the medium through which the texts were discovered is the two publishers' websites, and their medium of expression is written words. The medium through which the texts are materialised is digital books for Capovolte and print books for Asterisco Edizioni; hence, the medium through which the texts were accessed is an e-reading device in the former case and paperbacks in the latter.

5.1. Capovolte: Black feminism in translation

There are two translations by Capovolte whose source text is already part of a militant project: *Il luogo della parola* (2020) by Brazilian philosopher Djamila Ribeiro, originally published in 2020 as *Lugar de fala*, and *Memorie della piantagione. Episodi di razzismo quotidiano* (2021) by Portuguese writer Grada Kilomba, originally published in 2016 as *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism*. The former is translated from Portuguese, the latter from English. They are both published in the Intersezioni [Intersections] series, which was created to welcome feminist voices from all over the world, especially those who are still barely known in Italy (Capovolte 2019b). In both cases, the names of the translators do not appear on the cover but in the colophon.

5.1.1. Il luogo della parola *by Djamila Ribeiro*

Translated by Monica Paes and revised by Maria Terruzzi and Agnese Gazzera, *Il luogo della parola* is framed by several paratextual elements: the acknowledgements, an epigraph, an introduction to the target text editorial series, a translator's note, an introduction to the source text editorial series, an afterword to the target text. Three of them are translated paratexts classifiable as 'with-ST', with the author of the source text addressing the source text readers, while the remaining three are 'with-TT', with the publisher, the translator, and scholar Valeria Ribeiro Corossacz addressing the target text audience.

The source text publishing house, Editora Jandaíra, was founded in 2014 as Pólen Livros by Lizandra Magon de Almeida, who wished to represent as much as possible "a maior diversidade dos múltiplos universos femininos"[12] (Editora Jandaíra n.d.). Wishing to offer a female perspective on society and the world, she created a catalogue made of works mostly written by and for women (Editora Jandaíra n.d.). Feminismos Plurais [Plural Feminisms] is an editorial series directed by Djamila Ribeiro and presented for the first time in the introduction to *Lugar de fala*. The author employs the

[12] [the greatest diversity of the many feminine universes].

paratext to underline the mission statement of the series, which is a reflection on Black feminism aimed at the popularisation of Black women intellectuals as active subjects of resistance.

The Italian translation of the book contains a presentation of the target text editorial series, where Leccardi points out that Intersezioni gives a space to intersectional feminist voices, "soprattutto a quelle che in Italia non sono tradotte"[13] (Leccardi 2020, p. 8) because "[t]roppo poco nel nostro Paese è stato tradotto e offerto al dibattito pubblico"[14] (Leccardi 2020, p. 9). This opinion is shared by scholar Valeria Ribeiro Corossacz in her afterword, where she welcomes the book "nel panorama Italiano, in cui sono pochi i volumi tradotti del dibattito latinoamericano e caraibico sulla colonialità del sapere, e sono assenti le voci femministe che invece vi hanno avuto un ruolo centrale, anche di critica del suo impianto androcentrico"[15] (Ribeiro Corossacz 2020, p. 65). Both Leccardi and Ribeiro Corossacz emphasise the importance of the role of the translator as a cultural mediator who contributes to the dissemination of feminist ideas and the promotion of a more inclusive international debate.

Monica Paes identifies this role in the translator's note and points out that many works cited by Djamila Ribeiro have not been translated into Italian yet, hence the decision to translate the Portuguese and English titles into Italian to make them comprehensible to an Italian reader (Paes 2020, p. 10). She also discusses the complexity of the translation of the title *Lugar de fala*, which alludes to an extensive philosophical debate in Brazil about the concept of 'place of speech'. In the end, along with the other women who contributed to the Italian edition, she chose *luogo* ('place') – instead of *spazio* ('space') or *posto* ('site') – for two main reasons: on the one hand, Ribeiro herself refers to the notion of *social locus*, while on the other, in Italian *luogo* has a similar sociopolitical connotation (Paes 2020, p. 10). Moreover, Paes informs the reader of the addition of footnotes and glosses within the main text to explain the meaning of some words, expressions, and references to Brazilian culture (Paes 2020, p. 10). Quite strikingly, the translator is visible from the very first pages of the paratext as she inserts some notes in the acknowledgements to clarify the meaning of the Yoruba word *Ori* and in the epigraph to let the reader know that the word *infans* was written in Latin in the source text.

The discussion on her translation choices turns the translator's note into a metatext and fulfils the meta-communicative and the self-referential

[13] [especially to those which have not been translated in Italy].
[14] [in our country, too little has been translated and offered to public debate].
[15] [in the Italian editorial panorama, which lacks enough translated books about the Latin American and Caribbean debate on the coloniality of knowledge and shuns the feminist voices that were central in this debate and in the critique of its androcentrism].

functions by drawing attention to other elements of the paratext (i.e. the footnotes and the glosses). Both the translator's note and her notes to the translation present the informative function and clarify culture-specific references. All the paratextual elements of the target text share the generic function, as they define the status of the text as a translation. Besides the commercial one, which can be found only in Ribeiro's introduction when she mentions the affordable price of the book aimed to facilitate the circulation of the series, the other functions are shared by both the afterword and the introductions to the two editorial series. As a matter of fact, they all locate the work within a broader discourse on Black feminism for both source and target readers (referential f.) and as such offer an interpretation of the text (hermeneutical f.), promote its ideological stance (ideological f.), and direct its reception (instructive f.). Moreover, they all seem to implicitly underline the cultural significance of the text and the series in their source and target cultures (evaluative f.).

5.1.2. Memorie della piantagione. Episodi di razzismo quotidiano *by Grada Kilomba*

Despite being Portuguese, Grada Kilomba wrote *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism* in English as the book was born out of the PhD project she pursued in Germany. The publishing house, Unrast Verlag, was established in 1989 with the aim of giving voice to the revolutionary 'restlessness' (hence the name *Unrast*) of its founders (Unrast Verlag 2022). As its very first publications – *Antifaschistische Taschenkalender* [Antifascist Pocket Calendar] and the Feminist Science Series – testify to, its activism stems from antifascism, intersectional feminism, and antiracism.

The Italian translation was made by Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù and Marie Moïse. The paratext of the translated text contains the author's note to the translated (Portuguese) edition and a short 'with-TT' note by the Italian publisher, in which Leccardi justifies the decision of employing the schwa (ə) in the translation as an effort towards a more inclusive language (Leccardi 2021, p. 20). The author's note is classifiable as 'post-ST' as it was written for the Portuguese edition and then translated into Italian. In it, not only does Kilomba explain the genesis of the book but also comments on the Portuguese translation because the passage from one language to the other reveals "una profonda mancanza di riflessione e teorizzazione della storia e dell'eredità coloniale e patriarcale, così presente nella stessa lingua portoghese"[16] as some terms "continuano ad essere ancorati a un discorso

[16] [a deep lack of reflections on and theorisation of history and the colonial and patriarchal legacy, which is very much part of the Portuguese language itself].

coloniale e patriarcale, fatto che li rende estremamente problematici"[17] (Kilomba 2021, p. 10).

As pointed out by the translators, the Italian language faces the same thorny issues. Kilomba admits she started writing footnotes for her English translation of some Portuguese terms that ended up being included in the source text. These choices are then explained in detail in the author's note, which is largely made of a glossary illustrating the following words: *subject*, *object*, *other*, *Black*, *n-word*, *m-words* (*Mischling* and *mulatto*), *c-word* (the specifically Portuguese term *cabrita/o*), *enslaved*, *subaltern*. The author is fully aware of how the political dimension of language can both create and reinforce hegemonies and power inequalities. As a matter of fact, she concludes her note with a call to action for the creation of a new language with an inclusive vocabulary (Kilomba 2021, p. 18).

A reflection on language is indeed necessary not only in the case of Portuguese but also Italian. The peculiarity of the translated author's note is that it contains 'with-TT' elements, i.e. short notes on the Italian translation of each of the following terms discussed by Kilomba: *soggettə*, *oggettə*, *Altrə*, *Nerə*, *n.*, *m.*, *schiavizzatə*, *subalternə*. Like Portuguese, Italian is a grammatically gendered language, which entails a choice between masculine and feminine morphemes for nouns, adjectives, and past participles that English does not specify. In order to go beyond gender binarism and avoid androcentrism (according to which the masculine is the norm and the feminine its deviation), the translators – in agreement with the publisher – employ the neutral schwa (Ghebremariam Tesfaù, Moïse 2021, p. 12).

The paratexts of *Memorie della piantagione* are also a metatext where the Italian translation is commented on. The author's, translators' and publisher's notes present the following functions:

	Author's note	Translators' notes	Publisher's note
Referential f.	x		
Self-referential f.			x
Generic f.	x	x	x
Meta-communicative f.	x	x	x
Informative f.	x	x	
Hermeneutical f.	x	x	
Ideological f.	x	x	X
Instructive f.	x		

Table 1
The paratextual functions in *Memorie della piantagione*.

[17] [keep on being rooted in colonial and patriarchal discourse, which makes them extremely problematic].

Kilomba locates her text in a specific cultural and political context, revealing in which discourse it is situated (referential f.) and establishing how she wishes it to be read (instructive f.). The author moved from Lisbon to Berlin, from a place she believed still denied (and even celebrated) its colonial past to a completely different environment, where the colonial and nazi-fascist past rather caused guilt and even shame (Kilomba 2021, p. 8). She shares that in Germany she was able to express herself and reflect freely on her condition as a Black woman, facilitated and driven by the connection with groups of Black, feminist, and LGBTQIA+ intellectuals.

The association with these groups and the ideologies they promote (ideological f.) is also shared by the translators and the publisher of the Italian edition. Each paratextual element fulfils the generic and the meta-communicative functions even though most meta-communicative reflections are made by the author and the Italian translators (informative f. and hermeneutical f.). Indeed, the commentaries on the author's and the translators' terminological choices explain how the text was shaped and clarify some culture-specific references to both source (English) and target (Portuguese and Italian) languages.

5.2. Asterisco Edizioni: LGBTQIA+ rights in translation

The translations by Asterisco Edizioni whose source text is already part of a militant project are: *Rapporto contro la normalità* (2021) by Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire, originally published in 1971 and 2013 as *Rapport contre la normalité*, *Queer Nation Manifesto* (2022) by Queer Nation, originally distributed in 1990 as a leaflet, and *Divine. La storia della donna più bella del mondo (quasi)* (2022) by Spanish writer Álex Ander, originally published in 2020 as *Divine. La historia de la mujer más hermosa del mundo (casi).* The source languages are French, English, and Spanish respectively. The first two texts belong to the Eresia [Heresy] editorial series, which includes rare and out-of-catalogue texts that are pillars of the feminist and queer movements (Asterisco Edizioni 2024c). *Divine* is part of the Allògene series, which focuses on figures who depart from the norm on a cultural, linguistic and/or political level (Asterisco Edizioni 2024a). The names of the translators appear on the cover of the first two books (in the *Rapporto contro la normalità* cover, Massimo Prearo figures as the editor as well), while in the case of *Divine*, Bea Gusmano's name appears in the colophon.

5.2.1. Rapporto contro la normalità *by Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire*

Rapport contre la normalité was written by French revolutionary movement Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR) and first published in 1971 by Champ libre (now éditions ivrea) and then republished in 2013 by GayKitschCamp (GKC), a militant publishing house founded by Patrick Cardon in 1989 for the bicentennial of the French Revolution. The aim of GKC is to disseminate and document the history and literary heritage of the LGBTQIA+ community (GayKitschCamp n.d.). Indeed, the very first book it published was an anonymous pamphlet written during the years of the Revolution, *Les enfants de Sodome à l'Assemblée Nationale* (Besnier 2018).

Massimo Prearo edited the Italian version for Asterisco Edizioni in 2021, revising and integrating the 1972 translation by Virginia Finzi Ghisi and contributing the two paratexts: an introduction – *Lesbiche e froci sul fronte rivoluzionario: studio per un'archeologia politica* [Lesbians and faggots on the revolutionary front: study for a political archaeology] – in which he traces FHAR's history, and a revisor's note – *Note sulla revisione della traduzione* [Notes on the translation revision]. Prearo points out that his work was more extensive than initially expected as "[q]uello che doveva essere inizialmente un ritocco, si è rivelato, in realtà, fin dalle prime pagine, un lavoro profondo di ripresa, di riscrittura, in alcuni casi di nuova traduzione e anche di integrazione di parti mancanti nella prima versione"[18] (Prearo 2021, p. xxvii).

The revisor's note is particularly interesting for its comparison between Finzi Ghisi's and Prearo's translation choices. The reader is informed of the addition of an omitted chapter and the insertion of explanatory notes, while some terms or sentences, whose connotation was altered, misinterpreted, or ennobled (Berman 1985) by Finzi Ghisi, are commented on as follows:

- The term *baiser* was repeatedly translated as 'fare l'amore' [to make love] instead of 'scopare' [to fuck].
- The insult *sale gouine* was translated as 'troia' [whore], removing the insult 'sporca lesbica' [filthy lesbian] from the vocabulary of the speaking (and spoken of) subject. Not only does Prearo use the literal Italian expression, but he also includes the French expression in square brackets.

[18] [what was initially meant to be a revision actually ended up being, from the very first pages, a complex process of recovery, rewriting, and in some cases of retranslation and integration of missing parts of the first edition].

- The insult *pédé*, 'frocio' [fag/faggot], was often translated as 'omosessuale' [homosexual] or 'finocchio' [fag/faggot].[19] Since Finzi Ghini mostly employs 'frocio', Prearo replaces it with 'omosessuale' and 'finocchio' to avoid repetitions.
- The insults *pédale* or *tapette* should be translated as 'frocia' [fag, but with a feminine suffix] or 'checca' [fairy], which already correspond to *folle* or *tante*. Prearo translates them as 'culattone' and 'finocchio' [fag/faggot]. He does not specify how they are translated by Finzi Ghisi.
- The term *mec*, mainly used in spoken language, was systematically translated as 'omo' [homo], altering as such whole sentences because it literally means 'uomo' [man] as a type (*le mec*) or as someone who acts manly (*il fait le mec*).
- The sentence *Vous avez raison, les homosexuels de toute race, de tout poil, de tout sexe et de toute classe, doivent sortir du ghetto bourgeois* was translated by Finzi Ghisi as 'Avete ragione, gli omosessuali di ogni razza devono uscire dal ghetto borghese'. The diversity that now would be defined 'intersectional', i.e. intersecting 'race', 'type', 'sex', 'class' (Prearo 2021, p. xxix), is conveyed merely by the term 'race' in Finzi Ghisi's version. He employs all the above-mentioned terms instead.

Prearo concludes by stating that he wished to preserve the style of the 1972 translation and that he revised it only where it was absolutely necessary.

Both the introduction and the revisor's note are 'with-TT' paratextual elements addressing an Italian readership. The former fulfils the referential and the ideological functions in its positioning the text within French LGBTQIA+ discourse. The latter is a metatext thanks to its several reflections on translation and translation choices (meta-communicative f. and generic f.), in which Prearo clarifies the meaning of French words (informative f.) and explains his decision-making process (hermeneutical f.). The revisor's note is self-referential as it mentions other parts of the paratext, i.e. the notes added within the text itself. Finally, an instance of the evaluative function occurs when the cultural significance of the first Italian unabridged version of the text is claimed by the translator/revisor: "Questa traduzione è […] da considerarsi la versione integrale, inedita in italiano, del *Rapporto contro la normalità*"[20] (Prearo 2021, p. xxix).

[19]The translation of derogatory terms like *frocio* or *finocchio* is particularly problematic because there are no literal equivalents in English. Both can be roughly rendered as *fag* or *faggot* even though *frocio* is derived from the Roman dialect, while *finocchio* originated in the varieties spoken in Tuscany. The same problem occurs with other terms like *frocia*, *checca* or *culattone*. The English translations provided in square brackets should thus be considered as an approximation of the socio-pragmatic meaning of the Italian terms.

[20] [This translation is […] to be considered the first integral version of *Rapport contre la normalité* to be published in Italian].

5.2.2. Queer Nation Manifesto *by Queer Nation*

The *Queer Nation Manifesto* is possibly the most militant text among those selected for this article. As Lorenzo Bernini recalls in the preface, Queer Nation was officially born on 20 March 1990 in the midst of the AIDS crisis, when dozens of activists created a group to actively help obtain medical support for AIDS patients, give visibility to 'sexual minorities', and defend them against discrimination. A few months after its foundation, its manifesto was handed out during the Gay Pride Day Parade in New York.

The manifesto was first translated into Italian in 2021 by Francesco Brusa and Emma Catherine Gainsforth for the webzine *DinamoPress*, where it figured as "published anonymously by queers" (Bernini *et al.* 2021), before appearing in print version for Asterisco Edizioni. The paratextual apparatus comprehends a publishers' note, a foreword on inclusive language, and the preface written by scholar Lorenzo Bernini, which was already part of the online edition of the text. The first two paratexts are 'with-TT', while the third is both 'pre-TT' (as it was written for a previous publication) and 'with-TT' (as it appears in the first publication of this edition). All of them address an Italian audience.

A presentation of the translation and a reflection on the *Manifesto* itself is included in the publishers' note and the preface respectively. In their foreword on inclusive language, Bernini, Brusa, and Gainsforth explain their decision of using both masculine and feminine inflections instead of the asterisk or schwa. On the one hand, they deem it necessary to avoid the generic masculine, but on the other they acknowledge that "di fronte a questioni come la pandemia di AIDS, i ruoli di genere, le alleanze tra soggettività differenti nei movimenti LGBTQIA+, e in senso lato nelle politiche della sessualità, riconoscersi nell'identità maschile o in quella femminile *fa differenza*"[21] (Bernini, Brusa, Gainsforth 2022, p. 8). Since an easy distinction can be made between the sections written by and for male subjects and those by and for female subjects, they point out that the asterisk[22] and the schwa would lead to an excessive neutralisation of the text. Nonetheless, they note that the slash (/) dividing the masculine and the feminine forms must be understood "in un senso massimamente inclusivo, come comprensiv[o] di tutte quelle soggettività che si posizionano tra il maschile e il femminile, oppure altrove"[23] (Bernini, Brusa, Gainsforth 2022,

[21] [when dealing with issues like the AIDS pandemic, gender roles, the alliances between different subjectivities within the LGBTQIA+ movements and, in a broader sense, within sexuality politics, choosing a masculine or feminine identity *produces difference*].

[22] The word 'trans*' is the one case in which the asterisk is used.

[23] [in a completely inclusive sense, as comprehensive of those subjectivities who identify within the masculine and feminine continuum, or elsewhere].

p. 9). The main purpose of the translators is to adopt an inclusive language and to maintain the rhythm, rage, and register of the text.

The foreword is clearly a metatext and fulfils the meta-communicative, hermeneutical, generic, and ideological functions. The last two are found also in the publishers' note and in Bernini's preface, as every agent in the editorial project acknowledges the potential of this translated text to act as "un antidoto contro l'omonormatività e l'omonazionalismo dei nostri tempi complessi"[24] (Bernini 2022, p. 19). The only reference to other parts of the paratext (self-referential f.) is in the publishers' note, where Bernini, Brusa, and Gainsforth are thanked for their commitment as translators and editors and for their comments in the foreword and in the preface. In the latter, Bernini explains the background and impact of the *Manifesto* (referential f. and informative f.) and mentions the significance of its translation and dissemination (evaluative f.).

5.2.3. Divine. La storia della donna più bella del mondo (quasi) *by Álex Ander*

Álex Ander published *Divine. La historia de la mujer más hermosa del mundo (casi)* in 2020 for Egales, a Spanish publishing house specialising in LGBTQIA+ culture that was founded by Mili Hernández in 1995 with the aim of giving visibility to gay and lesbian literature in Spain (Egales n.d.-b). The book is part of the G editorial series, which includes essays by LGBTQIA+ authors and queer studies scholars (Egales n.d.-a). The Italian translation was made by Bea Gusmano and does not include any preface or foreword; her presence in the text is revealed only occasionally in the translation of some expressions or titles.

The paratextual elements of this edition are the 'with-TT' publishers' note and introduction (both addressing an Italian readership) and the 'with-ST' translated prologue (originally meant for Spanish readers). The Italian introduction – *Divine non c'è* [There is no Divine], written by Eleonora Santamaria and Luca Locati Luciani – articulates a more thorough investigation of the term *drag* and the reception of Divine in Italy:

> Mentre nei Paesi anglofoni il termine ombrello 'drag' non era confinato solo agli ambiti artistici, in Italia nella parola 'travestito' venivano collocate senza una reale distinzione le esperienze di travestitismo, transgenderismo, crossdressing, drag. Solo a partire dagli anni Novanta, in modo ancora embrionale, il termine 'drag' si diffuse in Italia per identificare i corpi spettacolarizzati che indossavano un genere sessuale altro o problematizzavano il concetto di genere. Ma, dilemma linguistico per eccellenza, ha senso parlare di percezione italiana di Divine se non siamo riusciti a distinguerla da altre

[24] [an antidote against the homonormativity and homonationalism of our complex times].

> esperienze di espressione di genere? Se non abbiamo avuto un modo per chiamarla, è esistita in Italia?[25] (Santamaria, Locati Luciani 2022, p. 9)

The dilemma of whether something exists if it cannot be named introduces a metalinguistic reflection on the definition of gender practices, whose conclusion is hinted at in the title: *There is no Divine*. One cannot confine Divine to one term or the other without failing to understand her and drag culture in general (Santamaria, Locati Luciani 2022, p. 25).

The publishers' note is a metatext fulfilling the meta-communicative function, where the editorial collective comments on their and Bea Guasmano's choice not to alter the style and form of the author, hence not to deconstruct the generic masculine or rewrite fat-phobic sentences (Capacitate, Cotta Ramosino, Muscio 2022, p. 5). In the note, moreover, the translation status of the text is fully acknowledged (generic f.) and Vegas's preface and Santamaria and Locati Luciani's introduction are alluded to (referential f.). The other elements of the paratext are both referential and informative in their positioning the text and Divine's figure both within and without Italian and Spanish culture.

6. Conclusion

This brief overview of the translation practices promoted by Italian small activist publishing houses has tried to demonstrate that

> [w]ithin the politics of a decolonising world, translation is the glue that catalyses new knowledge that potentially grounds a new political praxis. Thus, when it comes to intellectual activism, honing skills of translation constitutes both an important intellectual challenge and a political necessity. (Collins 2017, pp. xii-xiii)

Translation is used as a form of activism in fostering diversity both in the publishing industry and within books promoting gender, ethnic, sexual, and class equality. By commenting on the books they introduce and by including metalinguistic reflections, the paratexts of these translations act as a further element of activism. The analysis of their ideological and meta-

[25] [While in the Anglophone world the umbrella term 'drag' was not confined only to the arts, in Italy the term 'travestito' referred, without any real distinction, to the experiences of transvestism, transgenderism, crossdressing, dragging. Only from the 1990s onwards, the term 'drag' started being used in Italy to identify spectacularised bodies that 'wore' a different gender or problematised the very concept of gender. However – a linguistic dilemma par excellence – does it make sense to discuss the Italian perception of Divine if we have not been able to distinguish her from other gender expressions? If we did not have a name for her, did she really exist in Italy?].

communicative functions contributed to discerning their purpose. The former is almost expected if we take into account the topics discussed in the books. To some extent, the same applies to the latter: on the one hand, the presence of metatextual comments was a prerequisite for the selection of the translated texts included in this study, on the other, the discourse on intersectional feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights entails a deconstruction of the language of patriarchy, i.e. "the language of universalism [which] is the language of the dominant male subject" (Tissot 2017, p. 32).

The issue of language becomes particularly relevant when translating, especially – but not exclusively – when moving from a language that does not specify grammatical gender to one that does. Alternatives like the schwa, the asterisk, the parallel use of masculine and feminine forms divided (or united) by a slash have been adopted by Capovolte and Asterisco Edizioni. The general agreement seems to be the avoidance of the generic masculine, which is only employed in *Divine*. The readers are informed of its use in the publishers' note, which is followed by an appeal to use "la lettura del volume per riflettere sull'utilizzo della lingua e del suo potere, per provare a decostruire e riscrivere concetti e prodotti di una cultura figlia del potere e dei suoi meccanismi di segregazione e discriminazione"[26] (Capesciotti, Cotta Ramosino, Muscio 2022, p. 5).

As Vassallo (2023) argues, "we can start to forge a more equal world by beginning with balance of representation" (Vassallo 2023, p. 151), and the publication of books by marginalised writers – either because of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or class – is an important step towards diversity enhancement. Although the case studies here presented include books by Capovolte and Asterisco Edizioni only, the other Italian publishers mentioned in this article – Settenove, Somara! Edizioni, Le Plurali – contribute to the dissemination of activist ideas through translation as well. This is confirmed by the high percentage of translated texts in their catalogues, which proves how publishers and translators can truly become agents of change and give visibility to all those 'subaltern' voices that, quoting Spivak (1994), could not yet speak.

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[26] [the reading of this volume to reflect on the use of language and its power, to try to deconstruct and rewrite the concepts and products of a culture based on power hierarchies and mechanisms of segregation and discrimination].

international conferences in Italy, Belgium, England, Sweden, India, and Egypt. Her Italian translation of Katherine Philips's *Letters from Orinda to Poliarchus* is currently being revised for publication.

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PERFORMING AND TRANSLATING ACTIVISM INTO ART
A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract – In May 2007, Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal confined himself to Chicago's Flatfile Gallery for thirty-one days. He decided to live in a room under the 24-hour surveillance of a webcam connected to the web together with a robotic paintball gun that allowed both the audience in the gallery and online users to shoot the artist with sticky yellow paint. *Domestic Tension* is part of a provocative project proposed by Bilal to contribute to the discussion on the separation between 'comfort zones' – the safe spaces where war is imagined and articulated both linguistically and visually – and 'conflict zones', the many war-torn areas across the world whose voices are often lost. The project was accompanied by a video diary posted on YouTube and the book *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008). The book not only enriches the experience engendered by the event of the performance but also makes the YouTube video commentaries more explicit. In this sense, it acts as a form of translation of the several modes of communication of the artist. Integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) and Machin and Mayr's (2023) models, the article will adopt a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis perspective to investigate both the visual and the linguistic aspect of Bilal's multi-semiotic and intermedia art project. Bilal's intervention is crucial in this process not only by showing the complex dynamics of the racialised regimes of visual power and the intersemiotic strategies of resistance, but also by offering a performative counter-narrative that translates the otherwise inexpressible condition of living in a conflict zone.

Keywords: performance; translation; Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; activism; Wafaa Bilal.

I saw this work as a matter of fighting
for human rights, for my country as a whole,
commentary and activism on a collective level.
(W. Bilal and K. Lydersen "Shoot an Iraqi",
2008, p. 9).

1. Introduction

The concept of performativity usually calls attention to the simultaneous presence and interaction of actors and audiences in the art context. The focus is thus not so much on the actor/performer but rather on the relation between

the social actors who participate in the meaning-making process of the art event. As a principle, performativity questions normative power relations and allows to rearticulate hierarchies and identities. Inspired by Judith Butler's argument about the performative nature of gender (1990), this also entails a rethinking of language, in particular of the several ways in which it can be used as social action. According to Kita Hall and other linguists such as Deborah Cameron and Anna Livia, this perspective has been quite promising for discourse analysis since it sheds light on the ways in which our understanding of the world is discursively produced (Hall 1999). Indeed, the discourses we encounter are intertwined with social values and the ways we act. As Norman Fairclough highlights, discourses are "ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world" (Fairclough 2003, p. 124). Not only do discourses represent the world but they influence the way we act, relate to one another, or try to change social relationships.

Performativity presents a case for opening up a way of considering language use and identity formation: "[P]erformativity, particularly in its relationship to notions of performance, opens up ways to understand how languages, identities and futures are refashioned" (Pennycook 2004, p. 17). The notion of performativity involves an interesting way of considering language as a crucial part of a performance, in which different semiotic modalities of communication are integrated in a meaning-making process. In the artistic intervention, the process of meaning creation and negotiation is particularly interesting. Furthermore, enhanced by the widespread use of digital and mobile media of communication, new forms of activism and protest are facilitated by the modalities of networked media. A change in the dynamics of discursive power is evident in the fluid mediated communication of the participatory web that offers a new paradigm of communication to users across platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies (KhosraviNik 2017). This includes Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Instagram and Facebook as well as video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. The essence of this communication protocol involves forms of participatory communication with potential decentralised discourses conveyed by texts.

The semiotic modes of networked media "contribute to the emergence of new constellation of actors; they create new forms of articulation and performance that often resist and question the long-held power of institutions, parties or other bodies of (civil) society" (Foellmer *et al.* 2017, p. 1). The possibility to communicate and interact via chats or mobile media platforms allows citizens to contribute to transnational social movements and to be involved in forms of intellectual engagement. YouTube, for instance, embodies an influential multimodal form of communicating ideas to a wide

audience "by merging multiple modes (text, visuals, visual effects, audio, animation, etc.) presented by a user (the narrator, the singer, etc.) through an interface (youtube.com and its video player)" (Balirano 2015, p. 4).

This is particularly evident within the artistic scenario: in this context, language as a force of social transformation plays a crucial role in the debate about activism and cultural change. When digital media are embedded in artistic interventions, artists and audiences have alternative ways of connecting to each other. Through a focus on the performativity of interventions, it is possible to investigate new spaces for activism and social identities. This is also stimulating for the investigation of the relationship between language and social change. Through language we evaluate events and make choices that demonstrate how people, things, and events are perceived. As Fairclough (1992) has demonstrated, the analysis of language as a social practice can shed light on the relationship between discourse and social relations.

By stressing the transformative force of language, it is possible to highlight the micro level of practices and choices that question power relations and to propose counter-discourses. In the contemporary digitalised world, where conflicts, traumatic events, and oppressive regimes and discourses take place on a daily basis, the artistic sector seems to offer alternative bonds of solidarity and empathy by contributing to giving voice to war-ridden territories. Drawing on these conceptualisations, the central topic of this article is to shed light on how activism is constructed, performed, and transferred in the artistic discourse. Acts of translation counter-narrate dominant discourses and re-actualise the experience of living in a conflict zone under the constant danger of warfare. Baker's approach (2016) to translation as solidarity, where the significance of collaboration implies a work that is crucial for the political arena, has been an inspiring resource to consider artistic practices as strategies of activism. Understood in both its narrow and broader senses, translation involves on the one hand "rendering fully articulated stretches of textual material from one language into another, and encompasses various modalities such as written translation, subtitling and oral interpreting" (Baker 2016, p. 7). On the other hand, in its broader and more metaphoric sense,

> translation involves the mediation of diffuse symbols, experiences, narratives and linguistic signs of varying lengths across modalities (words into image, lived experiences into words), levels and varieties of language […], and cultural spaces, the latter without necessarily crossing a language boundary. (Baker 2006, p. 7)

In the case under investigation, the act of translation encompasses the use of English in the oral narration and the writings about the Iraqi conflict zone.

Translation, both in its narrow and broad senses, permeates the personal experiences of activists/artists/writers who focus on the difficulties and the complexities of translating into words the experiences of living under the constant danger of bombs. As a case in point, Wafaa Bilal's live installation *Domestic Tension* (2007) and his book *Shoot and Iraqi* (2008) demonstrate how the broader and metaphoric sense of translation is actualised in the transfer of a lived experience into words and images.

Creative cultural industries are contributing to developing translation as an inclusive form of communication that embraces activism and promotes the dissemination of narratives (Rizzo 2017). By stressing the role played by acts of translation in the transfer of war and conflicts into the artistic domain, it is possible to highlight the performability of translation beyond the linguistic domain, given the increased coexistence of semiotic resources in contemporary multimodal texts. Thus, translation extends towards spaces such as the museum or the art gallery that become sites of translation, or "intersemiotic translation" considered as "the basis of cultural communication through which ideas are circulated, translated and explained using language, images and other semiotic resources" (O'Halloran *et al.* 2016, p. 199). From this perspective, intersemiotic acts of translation can be conceptualised as a strategy of 'resemiotisation' that investigates the shifts of meaning taking place across different semiotic resources and what meanings are articulated as a result (O'Halloran *et al.* 2016, p. 199).

Translation is therefore given a crucial role in its use as a metaphor with the aim to generate and share public knowledge about the devastated conflict zones around the world. Strategies of translation in the artistic sector are based on choices applied to textual and non-textual contributions, such as audio-visual installations, exhibitions, documentaries, video productions, non-fictional books, and so on. In a world devastated by conflicts and wars, the artistic arena provides zones of exchange and acts of translation that activate powerful counter-discourses. Putting the conflict zones into words, images, and sounds within the artistic domain is an attempt to give a form to otherwise inexpressible conditions and to represent real-life tragedies to new audiences from a variety of perspectives by means of acts of translation.

By emphasising the role of the artistic sector in performing and translating activism, this article draws attention to an art project that demonstrates the modalities by which the arts can contribute to giving voice to the otherwise unexpressed voices coming from conflict zones, such as those of the Iraqi people who have experienced years of war under the bombs and in refugee camps. In contrast to mainstream discourse, the stories that emerge from the art project analysed in this article encourage an interest in the performability of translation as a metaphor that implies the transfer of ideas that would otherwise be unspoken in dominant discourses. This choice

is motivated by the intention of suggesting a system of narratives built by contemporary artworks that re-narrate stories of war, loss, and tragedy and ask readers and viewers to register nameless identities.

The work that will be surveyed in this study offers a space of political activism and promotes practices in the space of translation embodied by the art gallery. The analysis will focus on the intersection of linguistic perspectives, based on a social semiotic approach to language, which has its origins in the work of M.A.K. Halliday (1978) and in the later development by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021 [1996]). Multimodality will provide the tools to investigate both the visual and the linguistic aspects of the multi-semiotic and intermedia art project proposed in this article. This perspective is further implemented with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin, Mayr 2023), which has contributed to the extrapolation of the lexical choices that support the re-narration of the experience of living in a conflict zone.

2. A methodological overview: from Halliday's 'metafunctions' to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Language conveys information but also provides resources, options, and choices to assess how people feel about that information, how certain they are about it. The question of modality expresses the speaker's judgement or the obligations involved in what s/he is saying. Therefore, modality is seen in terms of a relationship between authors and representations:

> Modality is important in the texturing of identities, both personal ('personalities') and social, in the sense that what you commit yourself to is a significant part of what you are – so modality choices in texts can be seen as part of the process of texturing self-identity. (Fairclough 2003, p. 166)

Similarly, the concept of modality can be applied to visual communication because semiotic modes, such as static and moving images, present visual details which contribute to meaning-making practices. Indeed, this perspective is inspired by a social semiotic approach to language, which derives from M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). In opposition to a focus on language as an abstract system of rules, or grammar, social semiotics considers language as a set of semiotic resources that are chosen and used for achieving specific communicative purposes. Social semiotics is concerned with the ways people use the available resources both in language and visual communication (Machin, Mayr 2023). At stake is how language can be used not only to represent the world but to constitute it and create social practices.

Halliday's systemic-functional model investigates the ways language can be used to produce social practices since "[m]aking sense of our experience […] and acting out our social relationships" (Halliday 2004, p. 29) are the basic functions of language that construe human experience. According to Halliday, language is organised around three metafunctions: 'ideational', 'interpersonal', and 'textual'. The 'ideational' metafunction aims at representing what happens in the world; the 'interpersonal' metafunction relates to 'language as action', whereby we question and express our evaluation and attitude towards the others; the 'textual' metafunction relates to the way texts are constructed (Halliday 2004, pp. 29-30).

These metafunctions can also provide tools in visual communication. In Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) the ideational metafunction becomes the 'representational' dimension that refers to the 'represented participants' (people or things) involved; the active meaning of the interpersonal metafunction becomes the 'interactive dimension' that relates to the relationships of the interactive participants or social actors; the textual metafunction becomes the 'compositional' dimension that refers to the way coherence is visually accomplished. As for the representational dimension, it is important to identify the represented participants who are implicated and their qualities. With regard to the interactive dimension, an example of a visual technique used to investigate this dimension is represented by contact, when participants look at the viewers and establish a connection with them (Kress, van Leeuwen 2021, p. 116). This kind of image can be identified as a 'demand', one of the most fundamental types of speech role, according to Halliday's model (1978). When images do not directly address the viewer, the represented participants become the objects of the gaze and 'offer' themselves as parts of information. Furthermore, other strategies through which images express relationships are the 'size of frame' (the choice between a close-up or a long shot) and the 'perspective' (the alternative between an oblique angle and a frontal perspective). In addition to the above-mentioned dimensions, there is the element of the composition of the image, or the way in which the elements are integrated. For example, 'information value' refers to the positions occupied by the elements in the image (left/right, top/bottom, centre/margin), while 'salience' indicates the most relevant element in the image (Kress, van Leeuwen 2021, p. 179).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) have developed a model of analysis where language is considered as one mode of communication. Indeed, this approach investigates the multiplicity of 'modes' – or semiotic resources – which contribute to the communicative function of a text (Jewitt 2009; Kress, van Leeuwen 2021; O'Halloran, Smith 2011; O'Toole 2011). Multimodality is thus considered as an integrated and inter-disciplinary perspective for the study of representation "with the aim of analysing concepts and methods

within a systematic functional framework" (Balirano 2015, p. 4). Since multimodality is "the normal state of human communication" (Kress 2010, p. 1), multimodal approaches can be applied to the study of several forms of cultural representation such as art, literature, and social media.

This kind of approach, combined with Critical Discourse Analysis, can reveal "the implicit and not merely explicit aspects of communication" (Carbonara 2018, p. 91). Therefore, conducting a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) means to examine how communicative aims are achieved as well as the features used by speakers and authors "to persuade people to think about events in a particular way" (Machin, Mayr 2023, p. 2). More specifically, MCDA explores lexical choices (word connotations, overlexicalisation, adjectives); the use of particular quoting verbs; the iconographic resources employed for evaluating social actors (gazes and poses); the linguistic and visual strategies used to represent and classify 'social actors' (personalisation versus impersonalisation, individualisation versus collectivisation, specification versus genericisation, nominalisation versus functionalisation, the use of pronouns, etc.); transitivity, i.e. the representation of what participants do both linguistically and visually; linguistic strategies of concealment (nominalisation and presupposition); the use of metaphor and rhetorical tropes; the use of modal verbs, modal adjectives, and their adverbial equivalents, which allow to assess people's commitment to truth, as well as the visual qualities that are used to conceal or embellish what we see (Machin, Mayr 2023).

What follows is an example of how MCDA may serve to analyse multi-semiotic and intermedial artworks such as Wafaa Bilal's art project *Domestic Tension* and his book *Shoot an Iraqi*. The critical reflection on the co-articulation of different semiotic resources enables an exploration of the ways in which in Bilal's work certain identities and actions are foregrounded. A consideration of the resulting political implications can shed light on the strategies adopted to construct, perform, and translate activism into the artistic discourse.

3. Case study and analysis

Domestic Tension is the name of a provocative live art installation in which Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal confined himself to Chicago's Flatfile Gallery for thirty-one days. On 4 May 2007, he entered the gallery and lived for one month in a room set with a robotic paintball gun aimed at him which people could shoot over the Internet 24 hours a day. The project originated out of his grief at the death of his brother and his father in his hometown, Kufa, Iraq, and his need to connect his life as an artist in the comfort zone of the United States to the sorrow of the conflict zone in which his family and

many other people lived. In 2007, in fact, Bilal saw a TV interview with a young female American soldier, whose job was to drop bombs on Iraqi targets behind a computer in Colorado. This circumstance made him think about America's seeming callousness about Iraq and the war. His brother Haji had been killed precisely by a bomb dropped from an American helicopter, "orchestrated by someone just like this young woman, pressing buttons from thousands of miles away, sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a computer, completely oblivious to the terror and destruction they were causing to a family – a whole society – halfway across the world" (Bilal 2008, p. 10). By the end of the project, more than 65,000 shots from a paintball gun had been fired at him by people from 136 countries, as he explains in the book *Shoot an Iraqi*, published in 2008, to make sense of that experiment. Therefore, the aim of the project is to contribute to the discussion on the disconnection between the 'comfort zones' – the safe spaces where war is imagined and articulated both linguistically and visually – and the 'conflict zones', the many war-torn areas across the world whose voices are often lost.

In *Watching Babylon*, Nicholas Mirzoeff highlights that "[i]n the second Gulf War, more images were created to less effect than at any other period in human history" (Mirzoeff 2004, p. 67). It seems worth noting that American networks CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News broadcasted continuously during the six weeks of the war, as did the BBC and Sky in the UK, al-Jazeera in the Middle East, and many other networks worldwide. Crowds of journalists were present using all the advantages of digital technology to transmit reports. According to Mirzoeff, whose statement preceded the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, what is remarkable in retrospect is the lack of any truly memorable image. Though there was a constant circulation of images, there was nothing to see: "To adapt a phrase from Hannah Arendt, the war marked the emergence of the banality of images" (Mirzoeff 2004, p. 67). As a result of media saturation with non-stop anonymous images, the visual impact of war images has been reduced to such an extent that there is no longer anything spectacular.

Bilal's project can be considered as a way to react to media saturation and the consequent distance between the visual representation of war and perceived reality. The Gallery was his house for a month: he set up his bedroom with a bed, a desk, a computer, a lamp, and a coffee table. Several plexiglass screens separated his room from the space of the gallery, where the paintball gun was located. During his residency he never left the building though he had to leave the room for using the bathroom and the shower. Apart from these moments, he spent most of the time as a target of the gun, interacting with the people participating in the chat room on the project's website. The paintball gun had a robotic mechanism that fired in response to

the clicks of online viewers and gallery visitors. When more users attempted to fire the gun at the same time, their effort was to take control of the gun. It is also worth saying that there were users who tried to rescue the artist by turning the gun away from him.

The whole month was streamed live on the Internet without sound. This was in contrast with the environment of the gallery, where the gun was very loud. Each day, Bilal recorded hours of video and edited the footage into several video diary entries he then posted on YouTube.[1] According to the artist, "the stress and manipulation of one's every movement to avoid being hit" (Bilal 2008, p. 3) in *Domestic Tension* are powerful reminders of the constant threat experienced by those who live in a conflict zone. Thus, his performance aims to "shed light on the destruction and violence of warfare in a language that […] people who have never experienced conflict can understand" and to create "dialogue and build bridges – human being to human being" (Bilal 2008, p. 5).

Drawing on MCDA, it is possible to analyse Bilal's work on two levels – verbal and visual – following a comparison between the video diary posted on YouTube and the intersemiotic translation of this discourse in the book he published in 2008 with Chicago-based author and journalist Kari Lydersen as a co-writer. Following O'Halloran *et al.* (2016), we can claim that not only does the book integrate the artist's diary but also functions as an intersemiotic act of translation and a strategy of 'resemiotisation'. A series of comments will be made in order to show the implications of such a work and its counter-narrative potentiality in terms of activism. In order to trace ways in which activism is performed and translated into art and to reflect on the forms such an intervention involves, twelve videos from the online diary on YouTube and the corresponding entries in the book were selected. This choice was motivated by the idea of exploring these acts of translation both visually and linguistically in order to reflect on the choices of representation. To this purpose, the selection of entries where language is analysed is limited to instances in which Bilal expresses his experience of living in the Iraqi conflict zone and how this is re-actualised, performed, and translated into the gallery space that hosts his live art installation. The co-articulation of the different semiotic resources (mainly language, image, and sound) is investigated in order to evaluate how they contribute to conveying activism in a specific form of representation. The selection of the diary records was also guided by the presence in all of the entries of strong references to the emotional evaluation of the experience of living in a conflict zone: from a predominance of specific expressions to the choice of objects and settings, from the use of adjectives to the value of colours. This analysis intends to

[1] In Bilal's own words: "I interviewed my visitors and recorded my own rambling, raw, often painful monologues" (Bilal 2008, p. 3). For the videos of the online diary, see Bilal (2023).

identify some of the semiotic choices found in these texts both visually and linguistically in ways that allow us to outline a broader discourse on activism, resistance, and counter-narration. The choices create a field of meaning that can serve to foreground or symbolise some meanings and background others.

The choice of words used by Bilal is useful to underline the disconnection between a conflict zone and a comfort zone. Following Machin and Mayr (2023), we investigate the kinds of words used and if there is a predominance of some words or expressions. In the following extract from Bilal's book, we can take into account the kind of discourse the words we find in the text realise, the kind of world they constitute:

> I was overcome with feelings of intense hatred and anger toward this woman in Colorado and all the other young, fresh-faced US soldiers. But in my heart I knew that wasn't fair; they're mostly just kids caught up in a cycle of greed and power they don't understand, naïve pawns in the age-old game of aggression and warfare. Born and raised in the United States, an encapsulated sphere of privilege and safety, it's not surprising they would be unable to fathom the reality of a distant, foreign society and the ramifications of their actions. I was struck again by the anguish that has plagued me ever since Haji's death: though my consciousness and memories are forever connected to the conflict zone that is Iraq (and so many other wartorn countries across the globe), my present reality has become the same comfort zone as this young Colorado soldier's. I have a warm bed in a comfortable apartment, a hot cup of coffee or a pepperoni pizza at a moment's notice, a health club membership, wine and cheese at Friday art openings. I live in complete comfort and security, even when I am constantly worried about my family and my people. (Bilal 2008, pp. 10-11)

A lexical analysis of the text reveals the choice of words and expressions such as *hatred*, *anger*, *greed*, *power*, *naïve pawns*, *aggression*, *warfare* to connote the representation of the conflict zone in discourse. On the contrary, the type of lexis, in particular adjectives, chosen for the comfort zone where he lives now, plays an important role in the emotional evaluation.

According to Machin and Mayr (2023), adjectives enrich language and achieve a more powerful expression for the text producer. For example, *warm bed*, *comfortable apartment*, *hot cup of coffee*, together with *pepperoni pizza*, *health club membership*, *wine*, *cheese*, *comfort*, *security*, are revealing as far as the quality of the comfort zone is concerned and are associated with what Bilal defines the 'chasm' and the 'duality' in which he lives. Instead of producing a didactic work and explaining the real conditions of living in a conflict zone, he decides to produce a more interactive and dynamic work, turning the viewer into a fundamental part of the project. Even the expression chosen for the title of the installation, *Domestic Tension*, is particularly ambiguous in the contrast between the adjective *domestic* (which suggests ideas related to home and family) and *tension* (related to stress and pressure).

The conflict zone performed and translated into the artistic discourse conveys sets of associations:

> Friends tried to pass me wine and beer, but I knew I couldn't risk drinking; I was in a conflict zone. One paintball hit hard right on one of the openings in the bike helmet. The impact jarred my skull, and yellow paint dripped down my face behind the visor, stinking of the fish-oil base. I felt woozy for a moment; watching myself on video later I could see I was visibly swaying. One person was shooting constantly from Shabbona, Illinois. 'I hope he's not an adult', I thought. 'What would make one person shoot so much?' Little did I know that this was nothing compared to what was to come. Even with the pain and anxiety, there was still a party atmosphere. All parties have to end however, and finally I found myself alone with the gun. As the reality of what I was getting myself into fully dawned on me, I began to feel incredibly lonely and vulnerable. There was no way to escape the ticking noise of the gun when someone moved it, which was the worst part. I found myself wishing I could sneak away somewhere to paint, like I used to do when the abuse from my father became unbearable. (Bilal 2008, p. 30)

A lexical analysis of the above text reveals a prevalence of words such as *woozy*, *swaying*, *pain*, *anxiety*, *lonely*, *vulnerable*, which are also associated with the time when his father perpetrated violence and abuse on his family. By using terms such as *lonely* and *vulnerable* and sentences like "There was no way to escape the ticking noise of the gun", Bilal re-creates the tension he experienced both at home and in his home country within the space of the art gallery. Furthermore, he does not so much tell us about what happens in a conflict zone, but he creates an emotional evaluation of it. For example, the sentence "I found myself wishing I could sneak away somewhere to paint" to describe his feelings at the beginning of his live art installation makes the experience of the exhibition seem like an alternative experience, in other words, a performative counter-narration.

The analysis will compare the multimodal text of the YouTube diary and the entries of the book, where the diary starts on Day 7, in order to investigate how discourse is articulated in both texts and how the book integrates and translates the audio-visual text. The following research questions were formulated: how does Bilal use language to achieve a specific effect, to perform and translate activism into the artistic discourse? How is language used to let the audience and readers understand what art can do? How does the artist use the semiotic resources available in order to realise his goals? How does the selection of choices take place for the discourse on activism?

Let us begin by looking at the online diary posted on YouTube, how the discourse is articulated visually and linguistically in some relevant visual frames and extracts from the scripts that were selected on the basis of their relevance to the above-mentioned research questions (Figures 1-5). The

multimodal analysis is designed as follows: one significant visual frame fits into the corresponding column, while an extract from the script can be found in the other column.

Day number	Visual frame	Extract from the script
7		The place is absolutely a mess and I started cleaning up a little bit and you could see here is um the gun […] and people keep still keep shooting […] I have to stay low because the gun is just you could see just above me so I can stay out of the direct line. (Bilal 2007a, 00:38-01:24)

Figure 1
Still and extract from the YouTube video of *Domestic Tension* (day 7).

As we can infer from Figure 1, Bilal is particularly interested in narrating his experience, especially the mental and physical pain he goes through while being confined to the gallery space. In the videoblog, Bilal always portrays himself with goggles (Frame 7), which seem to connote something related to self-protection and allude to the necessity of defending himself from the paintballs. At the level of the representational metafunction, Frame 7 portrays Bilal in the gallery room where he is confined. The situation is very confused because of the constant sound of gunshots. Bilal is at the centre of the frame, while the fast and trembling movement of the camera expresses anxiety and a powerful emotional evaluation of the situation. The same effect is achieved by the many pauses and exclamations such as 'um' that bring more of a sense of pausing and uncertainty. As for the type of lexis, we notice the repetition of the word *gun* and the overlexicalisation of terms related to the fact that he has to protect himself from the shots ("I have to stay low"; "I can stay out of the direct line"). The repetition of words is woven into the fabric of discourse and gives a sense of persuasion. This is similarly reflected in his storytelling while he is in the gallery room and stands in front of visitors and online viewers.

As for the translation of this storytelling and how it is rendered in the book, the act of cleaning the room from the paintball residue makes him think of "how in Iraq, in a war zone, you must constantly be cleaning up and repairing the damage done, even though you know your work will likely just be destroyed again" (Bilal 2008, p. 32). The act of cleaning the gallery is rephrased in the book as the re-actualisation of his experience in the Iraqi conflict zone. In particular, the verb *to repair* is chosen to talk about the damage left by years of war and the impossibility to find a final 'repair'.

Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
8		We're getting a constant bombardment and I'm just going to let the camera roll for a few minutes to show you what's going on right here. I think just I haven't replaced these shields yet so some of these paint balls platter […] We have a few problems here some people were able to do multiple shots, and we have some damage to the plexiglass so we can I go in and fix it. (Bilal 2007b, 3:23-5:27)
9		It starts to bother me although I tried to be strong, but I start to be agitated more and more by it. We're hoping to continue and hoping to keep the conversation go on. (Bilal 2007c, 00:21-00:57)

Figure 2
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 8 and 9).

The evaluation of damage and the necessity to repair are reiterated in the Extract 8: the 'damage' to the plexiglass shield expresses again the idea of being in danger and suggests fear. Moreover, following the use of colour as a semiotic resource, we notice that the contrast of colours between the wall and the robotic paintball confers a dramatic effect, enhanced by the articulation of light and shadow (Frame 8). The videoblog of Day 8 is translated in the book mainly as the storytelling of his childhood that "coincided with Saddam's rise to power":

> In 1972 and 1973, when I was six and seven, there was a serial killer on the loose in Baghdad—or so we thought. Many mornings there would be news of another prominent family hacked to pieces by Abu Tubar — "the one with the axe." We didn't learn until later that "Abu Tubar" was actually Saddam's security service, killing communists, educated people, dissidents, anyone who might stand in Saddam's way. (Bilal 2008, pp. 34-35)

Here, the use of the pronoun *we* sounds personalised but also expresses a vague statement about the identity of those he presents as a 'we', perhaps suggesting his family and close friends.

Frame 9 depicts Bilal lying on the bed, 'agitated' and exhausted. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's interactional metafunction, which looks at the relationship between the represented participants and the interactive participants, Frame 9 is an offer image, because the represented participant looks up without making eye contact with the viewer. In this frame, the represented participant is the object of the viewer's scrutiny, so that the viewer becomes an invisible onlooker. Following Halliday's model, Kress and van Leuween would call this image an 'offer', since "it 'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of

contemplation" (Kress, van Leuween 2021, p. 118). The image looks like an imaginary barrier between the represented participant and the viewer, thus producing a sense of disengagement. However, Bilal's facial expression of pain creates a kind of social affinity with the viewer. This pain is translated in the book as the 'killing' of the lamp:

> Why is the lamp of such significance? Years of war in Iraq and constant danger in the refugee camps have left me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) […] [I]n the gallery I can't let myself fall into a deep sleep, or else I might forget where I am and sit up, putting my head in the line of fire. So in order to remind myself I'm in a dangerous place, I've been leaving the lamp on at all times. (Bilal 2008, p. 41)

The destruction of the lamp makes him cry. This is another sign of how 'agitated' he is and of the sense of the expression he wants to convey:

> As an artist my work is driven by my emotion […] but I didn't anticipate the emotional roller coaster this project would become. Usually my artwork is a reaction, sculpted by the feelings and thoughts unleashed by an event. This time the event itself is the artwork, and the emotions it releases become a direct part of the work. (Bilal 2008, p. 42)

Day number	Visual frame	Extract from the script
11		When I got up in the morning I noticed there was a heavy bombardment to the lamp to the point it was totally destroyed […] It was sad for me because the lamp represented just the only thing that stayed alive beside me in this space especially at night. (Bilal 2007d, 00:15-00:44)

Figure 3
Still and extract from the YouTube video of *Domestic Tension* (day 11).

The broken lamp is at the centre of Frame 11: here there is a dramatic representation of the lampshade, destroyed by paintball shots. In the verbal storytelling the lamp becomes "the only thing that stayed alive" (Extract 11). At the core of Day 11 in the book there is a visit of a former US Marine who had seen the YouTube video and got the artist a new lamp. This visit 'warms' Bilal's heart, who is "overcome with emotion":

> Matt says he never thought much about the consequences of shooting another person in war. He says he and his fellow Marines were always too busy trying to survive to be worried about their targets. But the paintball project has made him see things in a different light, enabled him to see his adversaries as human beings. (2008, p. 54)

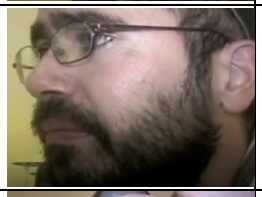
Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
13		The shooting is continued the gun is just above me and I just wanted to let you know just how it feels like to get hit repeatedly […] now I'm lying in bed I cannot get up because of their repeated shots so I just gonna lay down here until there is an opportunity to get away from the bed. (Bilal 2007e, 03:00-04:23)
14		It has been absolutely non-stop for the last three hours and I think it just these people are so disturbing, and I don't know what why this much hate in them […] it's so disturbing it's so disturbing […] I'm gonna go in a safer place […] very disturbing very hard. (Bilal 2007f, 01:18-05:39)
16		My body is just getting weak […] I think it's the lack of sleep the combination of the lack of sleep and stress um I start hating the sound very much […] I hope I will continue this I'll show you some of the room how destroyed it is […] you could see the level of destruction and the yellow colour as well. (Bilal 2007g, 01:34-02:40)
21		The good thing I see the end of it only nine days to go but the bad think I have started having a lot of health problems […] I started showing post-traumatic symptoms […] I could see that shooting has not stopped and in fact intensified […] I just want to illustrate the point that we are disconnected from reality there is a comfort zone and then there is a conflict zone. (Bilal 2007h, 00:29-01:40)
24		I hope that does give you an idea of how hard it is to be in this place the game is not no more or it's no longer physical it's mental it's mental because physical harm doesn't mean anything anymore I'm not afraid of the gun I could just and that's scary […] My intent is to raise awareness of my family in Iraq. (Bilal 2007i, 05:03-06:23)
25		As you can see we are under a heavy heavy bombardment. It has been very steady this morning and almost every second or even sometimes a few seconds and it has been any global not just United States. (Bilal 2007j, 00:02-00:20)

Figure 4
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 13, 14, 16, 21, 24, and 25).

To stimulate engagement seems to be one of Bilal's main interests. The use of pronouns, in particular *you*, is predominant in most of the extracts: for example, "I just wanted to let you know just how it feels like to get hit repeatedly" (Extract 13); "I'll show you some of the room how destroyed it is" (Extract 16); "I hope that does give you an idea of how hard it is to be in this place" (Extract 24); "As you can see we are under a heavy, heavy bombardment" (Extract 25); "Thank you very much you have been great". Following Machin and Mayr (2023), personal pronouns personalise relationships and convey a sense of personal involvement, as an important way to communicate a sense of community. In Frame 13, the yellow colour of the paintball shot on the plexiglass shield expresses intensity. Indeed, saturated colours tend to be emotionally engaging and bold (Ledin, Machin

2020). One of the effects of increased saturation is sensory, or a "modality of the senses", to put it in Kress and van Leeuwen's words (2021, p. 156). The yellow colour makes the paintball shot more than real and adds an extra intensity to the viewer's engagement.

The book translates the visual emotional intensity of the yellow colour into the multiple shots fired by online users: "The shooters have figured out that they can fire the gun multiple times in quick succession if they open multiple browser windows on their computer" (Bilal 2008, p. 58). Here, it is useful to consider how participants are described as a part of a collective, the 'shooters'. The shooters are in this case a generic group, without additional referential information that would individualise them. Therefore, the group of shooters is not humanised and cannot receive any kind of empathy for the way they are interacting with the art project. Furthermore, an Iraqi visitor (a friend of Bilal and a former war photojournalist) states:

> A lot of people ask me about war because I've seen so much of it, but most of the time I cannot tell them what war is. This project shows exactly what it is. It's not a video game. I see you sitting there in fear; you are a human being. (Bilal 2008, p. 59)

Bilal is sitting in the gallery and is frightened, like in a real conflict zone. Those who do not experience war are disconnected, dehumanised, and collectivised as 'them'. This disconnection returns in Extract 21, where he states that "we are disconnected from reality there is a comfort zone and then there is a conflict zone".

A pivotal point here is to understand how Bilal attempts to bridge the gap between the comfort zone and the conflict zone. The language and the visual resources that he uses demonstrate he intends to achieve the specific effect of emotional intensity. His linguistic and visual performance of activism translates the experience of living in a conflict zone within the gallery space. Frame 14 presents again his face as an offer image, with a close-up on Bilal's face looking up without making eye contact with the interactive participants (the viewers). In this image, the viewer is the subject of the look, while Bilal's painful face, as a represented participant, is impersonally offered as an item on display. This reinforces what is happening verbally as he continuously repeats and overuses the adjective *disturbing* ("It's so disturbing") in the fabric of discourse (Extract 14). This strategy of overlexicalisation tends to give a sense of over-persuasion and proves that something problematic is represented. The aim here is to connote a sense of activity and engagement in terms of affect. Moving images can articulate dynamic meaning-making processes. Indeed, as Bilal looks up, we can notice that he looks towards the section that according to the compositional metafunction represents the 'ideal' level. This part has a stronger emotive

power, as opposed to the lower section that represents the 'real'.

"It's so disturbing" is the sentence repeated by Bilal in his videoblog entry Day 14. In the book this is translated as the disturbing horror of the war that he experienced during US bombing:

> So I stayed in Kufa through weeks of U.S. bombing that destroyed the whole city's infrastructure, and most of the country's; electricity generation, communications and bridges. My favorite spot to paint was the Kufa Bridge—until it was bombed, killing scores of people including a wedding party. I was painting at my aunt's house at the time, it was just luck that I had decided not to go to the bridge that day. The reverberations shook the house and all the surrounding buildings, sending tremors through my bones. I raced toward the bridge with my heart pounding, joining a screaming, wailing crowd converging on the site of the explosion. There were pieces of flesh and twisted metal everywhere. Staggering through the destruction in a state of collective shock, we gathered up the bits of flesh and torn clothing and threw them in the river, my eyes smarting and my throat swelling from the horrific smells and sights. (Bilal 2008, p. 73)

The above passage demonstrates that certain expressions were chosen by the text producer for his own motivated reason. For example, if he chooses to say that "they [he and other unnamed people] gathered up the bits of flesh and torn clothing and threw them in the river", this immediately brings certain sets of associations. The disturbing situation of the online shooters is translated in the book as the black void of death and the endless pain produced by real bombings. The aim is to try to engage the reader by producing a sense of disgust and pain.

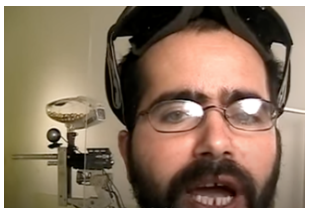
Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
26		There are about over 120 people right now online something really amazing is happening right now I have about thirty-six or so people doing left action which means they are pressing the button down on the left preventing people from panning into my direction and I do have a name for this action now it is on the chat and it's called virtual human shield what an amazing event. (Bilal 2007k, 00:08-00:48)
30		To the supporters thank you very much you have been great it has been very hard to me ups and down united people body people but that's what art is supposed to do it is supposed to inform it's supposed to educate and it's supposed to be part of life so thanks everybody for your great support and one more thing I have no resentment to the people who shot it's an encounter it's not a didactic piece and it's an open narrative we could all impose our own narrative on it. (Bilal 2007l, 01:02-01:46)

Figure 5
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 26 and 30).

In Extract 26, Bilal defines people who are pressing the button trying to prevent users from shooting as 'virtual human shields'. This is defined as an "amazing event". Nothing is said about those people in the videoblog, while the book integrates this entry of the diary and clarifies that Beverly Wilson, an Art Institute graduate, came across the website during a heavy shooting:

> She figured out that by constantly clicking the gun left, she could keep it away from me, as long as her clicks outnumbered the aggressive shooters aiming at me. Through the chat room she organized more people to protect me. They are calling themselves the Virtual Human Shield. (Bilal 2008, p. 142)

Bilal sees the Virtual Human Shield as "a form of the cyber political resistance", given the fact that "the internet opens new frontiers for fighting oppression and injustice" (Bilal 2008, p. 142).

As already anticipated, moving images can construct meaning-making sequences. Indeed, the shift to Frame 30, a shot from the second last day of the confinement, shows a close-up on Bilal's face who looks straight into the camera and talks passionately. Frame 30 is in fact a 'demand' image because the represented participant demands something from the viewer through a direct gaze. In this particular case, Bilal is asking the viewer to enter into a relation of emotional affinity with him since he tries to bring the viewers and the online users (both are the interactive participants) into his personal experience of living in a conflict zone. Drawing on proxemics, Kress and van Leeuwen highlight that in everyday interaction the distance we keep from one another determines social relations according to which we carry invisible barriers that allow the others to come closer to us or not. This goes from close personal distance to far social distance. The close shot implies an identification with the viewer, who is involved and thanked for the "great support" and for being "great" (Extract 30). Here, Bilal expresses that his project does not intend to be a "didactic piece"; rather, it is "an open narrative" where "we could all impose our own narrative on it". Again, the use of the pronoun *we* personalises relationships and conveys a sense of personal involvement. The viewer is thus asked to intimately and emotionally partake while Bilal concludes his video diary. This entry is rendered in the book with the unexpected arrival of a package with a "graceful white peace lily" and the message "From a grateful left clicker. The world is a better place because of people like you" (Bilal 2008, p. 157). One of the users taking part in the virtual human shield sent this to the artist to thank him for his activism. "Hope is alive" is what he proclaims in the book to express his gratitude and joy.

4. Conclusion

Employing a theoretical framework derived from Systemic Functional Linguistics, this essay has proposed a MCDA of Wafaa Bilal's art project *Domestic Tension* (2007) and his book *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008) with the aim to explore one of the possible ways in which the experience of living in a conflict zone is performed and translated into the artistic discourse, and to investigate what forms of activism this project produces. The project represents the artist's intention to narrate in a YouTube diary and a book both his experience in the gallery and the time he spent in the Iraqi conflict zone. The book not only enriches the experience engendered by the performance but also integrates the video commentaries and acts as a form of translation between the different semiotic modes of communication.

The analysis has focused on a selection of still images and extracts from the video commentaries representing Bilal in his confinement in a Chicago art gallery with a paintball gun directed at him that could be activated by visitors and online users. In the selected entries (which are representative of the whole project), the different semiotic resources implicated in the representation of Bilal as a confined man in a conflict zone have demonstrated, on one hand, the desire to involve the viewer in an active way and, on the other, the need to produce a counter-discourse. In particular, the specific choices in language and visual communication contribute to an emotional involvement of the viewers and the readers. The linguistic choices and the visual resources used in the art project achieve the effect to perform activism into the artistic discourse and to translate the otherwise inexpressible condition of living in a war zone. Specifically, the terms used by the artist and the predominance of some expressions re-create the tension and the constant fear that the artist experienced in his home country. The type of lexis, in particular the use of adjectives, plays an important role in the emotional evaluation. Furthermore, the use of different semiotic resources, such as moving images and the endless disturbing loud sound of the gunshot produced by the paintball gun, intensifies the meaning-making process.

The need to produce a counter-discourse is evident in the way the different semiotic resources contribute to the narrative of the art project and produce meanings that disrupt dominant discourses on warfare and conflict zones. In particular, the comparative analysis of the multimodal text of the YouTube commentaries and the entries of the diary published in the book allows to investigate how discourse is articulated in both texts. As Bilal declares on Day 30, the goal of this art project is to engender the possibility of an encounter and to try to bring the experience of living in a conflict zone closer to viewers and readers. Finally, the MCDA of the linguistic and visual

semiotic resources can shed light on the various strategies adopted to perform and translate a militant action into art.

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