

# TRANSLATION AS A SITE OF AGENCY AND ACTIVISM

## Acts of Resistance and Change

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### 1. Introduction

The alliance between sociology and translation has fostered the development of studies centred around the agency and performativity of the translator and their role in society (see Baldo, Inghilleri 2018; Lange 2025). Far from being a secondary activity which mimics or reflects original texts, translation is a powerful practice whose impact has ideological and political outcomes and implications (Maestri 2018, p. 1). The powerful practice put in motion by individual translators and/or translator networks demonstrates that translation is a privileged site of agency and resistance, central to activism and action. In a world driven by political figures and institutions who misuse power to advance the interests of the rich, the white, the male, the Westerner and the colonizer, there is an urgent need to devote attention to the action taken to support those whose rights are underrepresented or inadequately protected: the vulnerable (including the environment), the defenceless and the marginal exposed to social injustice. Due to the ethical responsibility that translation holds and the ability to disseminate messages across borders, translation has enormous social, cultural and political potential. It can stand in opposition to the forces that insist on placing privilege in the hands of those who perpetrate injustice. It has the potential to resist structures of power established to perpetuate social, political and cultural subordination (House 2024, pp. 44-45). It can rewrite narratives which are in tension with the dominant ones (Baker 2006). It can also foster collaboration, which is vital in sharing not only resources, tools and examples of good practice (Mason 2014), but also political agendas and the social energy needed to move to action. Our view is therefore in line with the existing scholarship on activist translation, starting from the work carried out by Translation Studies scholars Mona Baker and Julie Boéri. Whereas the former sees activist translation as a practice that “challenge[s] the dominant narratives of the time” (Baker 2006, p. 462), the latter defines it as an activity set out “to connect across the globe and to bring about social and political change” (Boéri quoted in Boéri, Delgado Luchner 2021, p. 246). For

this reason, it is crucial to explore activism and agency as prismatic reflections of action, resistance and change. Either as part of a group or as single individuals, translators can set new ideas in motion, adopt corrective approaches, bring about change and speak for the vulnerable and the one in need. They can also initiate collaborative practices and confront society with the power of language. As Baker says (2006, p. 471), concrete activism, including demonstrations, is not enough to undermine hegemonies. Activism must challenge narratives and stories and in order to do so, it needs to target language. As language specialists, translators have the skills, the competence and the knowledge to do so. In an attempt to take up Julie Boéri and Carol Maier's encouragement and "rethink translation [...] in socio-, geo-political and ethical terms" (2010, p. 1), we situate activism and agency at the heart of translation and unpack its potential as a language practice to aspire to.

This special issue responds to the need for an in-depth investigation of activism and agency and brings to light translation work and translation networks created to support a culture of change across the world. It aims to celebrate the values and the principles endorsed and validated by activist translators and/or networks. As Julie Boéri and Carmen Delgado Luchner claim, "the very purpose of activism is to defend specific values and principles associated with social change (for instance 'participation', 'deliberation' and 'horizontality' [...]) and to usher in alternatives that embody these" (2021, p. 247). Contrary to being a solitary activity, translation bridges gaps, promotes relationality and increases involvement and engagement. Engagement is an important concept in activist translation. Not only does engagement include linguistic interventions applied to the translated texts and their content, but it also comprises actions around the translated text – the choice of what to translate and/or disregard, events organized to promote translations, etc. (Boéri, Delgado Luchner 2021, pp. 252-253). What we uncover and discuss here is the relationality and the engagement in action that translation supports to address injustices. In so doing, we have intentionally broadened our scope, embracing examples of translation activism and agency from the present as well as from the past. In particular, we have included studies on courageous and exemplary women that have paved the way for further work in support of justice and equality. We have also fostered an approach to the study of activism in translation that promotes and enhances fluidity and non-hierarchical constructions, acknowledging asymmetries and/or complementarities between Source Texts and Target Texts. As we are aware that "hierarchy is a condition and consequence of the reification of the binary that is difficult to challenge from within a representational epistemology that continues to dominate" (Knights, Kerfoot quoted in Linstead, Brewis 2004, p. 359), we wholeheartedly support methodologies that inform feminist visions of social and linguistic activism. Finally, the special issue seeks to redress the imbalance in how the very concepts of activism and agency are at times considered in society. As

Eliaana Maestri's contribution reminds us, activists are sometimes portrayed, perceived and depicted in a negative light (see also Bashir *et al.* 2013), which does not just do a disservice to them and the values that they represent. These negative depictions have all sorts of negative knock-on effects, to the detriment of the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, the fragile and the peripheral. It is only by bringing to light the amount of work carried out by translators and those involved in social and/or cultural movements of texts and people that we demonstrate and support the positive and valuable action taken by them.

The special issue is also a celebration of the research-intensive collaboration between the following institutions: the University of Exeter, UK, the University of Ferrara, Italy, and the University of Valencia, Spain. Notably, the volume comes out of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the European Colloquium on Gender and Translation, entitled *Gendering Activism* and organized by the University of Ferrara (Prof. Eleonora Federici and Prof. Giulia Giorgi), the University of Exeter (Dr Eliaana Maestri) and the University of Valencia (Prof. José Santaemilia) on 6-7 July 2022, in Ferrara. The main aim of the European Colloquium, which was inaugurated by Prof. Eleonora Federici and Prof. José Santaemilia (as co-founders) and which has shifted venue from edition to edition since 2016, is to periodically offer an overview of the latest trends in the research on translation and gender around the world. One of the volumes that emerged from the collaboration between the co-founders is the 2021 study on *Gender and Translation: New Perspectives and New Voices for Transnational Dialogues*. Being mindful of the impact of translation on social, political and cultural transformations, the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the European Colloquium opened a forum for discussion on the contribution offered by practitioners, stakeholders and scholars to the study of translation as activism and agent of change. Our intention was to follow the trend established by previous editions of the European Colloquium, by continuing the study of the various interconnections between gender and translation. However, since activism is a research area that needs to be developed and explored further within the field of Translation Studies, we wanted to enrich and complicate the gender and translation pairing, by prioritizing the interplay between gender and activism in translation. The 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the European Colloquium attracted international attention and strengthened links between institutions and colleagues, which we continue to cherish as vital steps towards transnational cooperation and work in support of diversity and inclusion. It also brought to light new visions and perspectives on both activism and agency in translation, which we now offer to our readers. This volume, which is the outcome of fruitful discussions and reflections hosted in Ferrara, recognizes the importance that feminisms have in shaping and/or reshaping approaches to the study and practice of translation and its role in society. In addition, it embraces and enhances other, complementary and supplementary, methodologies which

go hand in hand with various feminisms and the actions taken to challenge the *status quo* vis-à-vis justice, diversity, equality and inclusion.

Since *Gendering Activism*, work has continued to grow and evolve and other venues have offered to host subsequent editions of the European Colloquium, embracing its ethos and broadening its vision. The latest European Colloquium was held last July at the Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona, opening discourses beyond European borders and Universities through the topic of transnational feminisms. We are keen to continue to plant the same seeds for productive work as the ones that we used to celebrate the blossoming of our research trajectories, but we appreciate that different soils produce different plants – which we welcome. It was and it is very important to see how the issues surrounding feminist translation have adapted and grown on different European soils and how the dialogue among these different voices can help scholars and translators to develop new strategies and methods, which in turn are likely to encourage new and fruitful dialogues, collaborations and interconnections. Finally, the advent of AI has posed challenges to the theory and practice of translation. We therefore strongly feel that the transnational collaborations that we have forged serve multiple purposes, including the support offered to Translation Studies itself, a discipline which is much needed in today's society ruled more and more by technocracies and machines.

The volume welcomes the cross-pollination with a number of disciplines, including but not limited to Translation Studies, Gender Studies, Migration and Mobility Studies, Cultural and Media Studies, Sociology, Ethnography, Politics, Linguistics and Literary Criticism among others. Besides its overview of the growing diversity of research (both theoretical and practical) on translation, this volume has a thematic orientation focused on the role played by translation as agent of resistance and change of the dynamics between gender, class, race and power, the human and the other-than-human in society. Starting from the work carried out by Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism* (2020), the volume develops further the notion of the translator as activist, namely as champion of political change, advocate of gender equality, promoter of gender diversity, voice-giver of minorities and migrants and agent of change capable of putting “into words the perspectives and experiences of oppressed and silenced peoples” (2020, p. 2). Our work also follows in the footsteps of Olga Castro and Emek Ergun's research on *Feminist Translation Studies. Local and Transnational Perspectives* (2017) in order to widen the discussion on the interplay between feminist translation, agency and activism as academic fields of enquiry. Finally, our collaboration and research follow the groundwork laid by Helen Vassallo's (2023) study of translation and the publishing industry. Her monograph demonstrates the continuous need to question and challenge the principles that regulate the involvement of women in translation and publishing. For Vassallo, both action and activism are

essential in achieving greater inclusivity and successful translations. As she claims: “There can be no successful translation without feminist politics” (2023, p. 15). We share her view and apply this principle to our practice.

The volume aims to make the important role of translators visible in: 1) promoting and enabling social, political and cultural change around the world; 2) promoting equality; 3) fighting discrimination; 4) supporting gender diversity; 5) supporting human and other-than-human rights; 6) empowering minorities; 7) challenging authority and injustice not only across European countries but all over the world; 8) facilitating network-building activities among activists and agents of change and 8) teaching feminist translation as a pedagogical act in support of social and gender equality. In so doing, the volume places emphasis on how language and translation can construct a different reality, a reality that aspires to protect against violence and unfair treatment. Moreover, as we live in a multimodal world, we are aware that communication is not limited to verbal language or, even, human language. And for this reason, we are in line with Baker’s research practice and examples – as discussed in the Translation Studies scholar Jan Buts’s work (2023). Although Baker is adamant that language plays a crucial role in activism, she also states that it is not enough to put in place modes of investigation of prefiguration focused exclusively on verbal interaction. The concept of prefiguration is particularly important, when scholars work on activism. Prefiguration is “the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs quoted in Buts 2023, p. 267). In other words, prefiguration is “the principle of embodying the change one wants to see” (Boéri, Delgado Luchner 2021, p. 255). As we want to tease out the activist potential that translational practices hold, we embrace Baker’s encouragement and expand “the powerful concept of prefiguration” to include “the use of verbal, visual and aesthetic languages” (Baker quoted in Buts 2023, p. 267). In so doing, we have encouraged multimodal and intersemiotic approaches to translation and activism already established by some of us (Maestri, Wilson 2017), along the lines of what Baker maintains. As a result, we have included studies by scholars working on the cusp not just between activism and advocacy, but also language and the visual.

## 2. The contributions

The issue opens with Maria Escobar Aguiar’s article on the concept of militant translation. Escobar Aguiar draws from her experience as volunteer translator in the Proyecto Desclasificados, an interdisciplinary project run by three renowned Argentinian human rights organizations: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) and Memoria Abierta. Within

this project, a group of eight translators works collaboratively to translate into Spanish an archive of declassified documents issued by U.S. intelligence agencies and government (e.g., CIA, FBI, Department of State, among others). This article focuses on the role of feminist translators/militants in Argentina, offering a new perspective on this field and demonstrating the energy that groups can produce and capitalize on. Individuals also drive change and pave the way for future work as activism. This is what Claudia Capancioni's article establishes. Capancioni helps us to appreciate how important it is to look at the past and retrace the role of pioneering feminist translators. She examines the work of the British writer Sarah Austin who, in the nineteenth century, asserted her intellectual and political agency as a translator. Austin was a highly acclaimed interpreter of innovative philosophical and scholarly texts originally produced in French and German and showed the significant role of translation for a social, political and cultural change. Through her work as a translator, Austin outlined the need for primary education for women. Education is an extremely crucial arena in which activism can be practiced and extended. It is within this arena that Lupe Romero operates. Her article shows the significance of teaching feminist translation theory and practice in class today. Teaching becomes activism when developing gender competence in the translation classroom acquires a manifold purpose. The purpose is not only to stimulate critical thinking in students, providing them with new tools to recognize stereotypes, norms and social gender roles present in the starting texts. The purpose is also to guide them in learning how to problematize socialization patterns and develop skills and strategies imbued with a feminist conscience and ethics.

As mentioned above, translation and activism are extremely powerful especially because they employ language, fashioning its rhetorical and stylistic means to achieve their ends. However, they can also rely on the visual, taking advantage of the multimodal aspect of communication. For example, Julia Kölbl's contribution considers paratextual resources. In a manner similar to Capancioni, the author goes back in time focusing on specific social and political contexts, namely the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire and the German Empire in the years 1871-1918. However, to tease out relevant observations, Kölbl analyses (auto)biographical data as well as paratextual materials. In so doing, Kölbl demonstrates how historical and extratextual perspectives are needed in order to heighten our understanding of the intertwining of translation and activism. Paratexts also represent the privileged site for intervention in Eleonora Federici's study. In her article, Federici underlines the role of feminist translation in the reception of feminist theories and practices around the world. Through a diachronic perspective Federici shows how translators, intellectuals and writers have collaborated to translate, publish and disseminate key feminist texts into the Italian context. The article delineates a history of collaboration, agency and action among American and

Italian feminists. Action also represents a compelling milestone in Eliana Maestri's work on ecotranslation and care. Her article focuses on her 2022-23 Arts Council England project, discussing innovative strategies of visual translations and how we can take creative and collective action to tackle the current environmental crisis. Translating across media borders, namely from fiction to visual artefacts, is not just a way to improve the quality of climate change communication, by enhancing public participation, amplifying artistic voices and supporting climate justice. It is also a way to reflect on how we advocate for the planet and respect the agency that the other-than-human holds and exercises. The originality of her work rests on the emphasis that she places on the need to care, both to maximize the contribution that translation offers to environmental communication and to take firm steps towards action and climate advocacy. Drawing on theories advanced in ecotranslation and ecofeminism, Maestri discusses fruitful common grounds between these disciplinary approaches and a practical, creative example to be drawn on in the name of climate advocacy and activism.

The last four articles highlight the cultural value that translational agency encapsulates, demonstrating the importance that individual interventions acquire within different situational contexts and textual scenarios as sites of action. As Anne Lange claims, "activist translators and interpreters do receive academic attention more as a group" (2025, pp. 438). We appreciate the reasons for it and have given attention to groups and how translation agents join forces. However, we also want to bring to light the unique agency of individual translators and their contribution to society. Ray Wang looks at the translations of André Aciman's highly acclaimed English *Bildungsroman*, entitled *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), into Chinese. Specifically, Wang conducts a textual comparative study of the term *fuck* across six instances in the four Chinese editions published in the Chinese mainland and Taiwan in 2009, 2012 and 2018. In so doing, the author outlines how changes in translation are due to ideological implications in different cultural and political contexts and shows how activism can be carried out in different forms. In order to reflect on individual interventions and agency, Nataša Raschi takes us to non-Anglophone contexts and readers. In particular, Raschi analyses: Paulette Nardal, who translated American texts for French-speaking authors of the Négritude at the beginning of the 20th century, Véronique Tadjo, who wrote an African myth in French, self-translating it into English and Werewere Liking, who mixes many African languages in her literary production, in the Ivory Coast. Her analysis shows how translation and self-translation are also part of feminist activism in African contexts. The translator's act also takes centre stage in Bruna Mancini's contribution, a contribution which focuses on two translations of an iconic woman writer. In particular, Mancini compares two Italian translations of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopia *Herland* (1915) outlining how the translation of feminist utopias can be connected to activism

and to a rethinking of our cultural values. The comparison between the two translations enables us to consider the active presence and creativity of the translator in the utopian text and appreciate them as a self-sufficient node in a dynamic web, connected to the principle of the fidelity that translation pursues. The last article, by Anna Lee-Popham, takes a different spin, while continuing to focus on the creative agency of writing, and, in particular, poetry. Lee-Popham examines how poetry might act as a translation of the Empire. She posits that such translation is a critical component of resistance, following Gould and Tahmasebian's (2020) framing of translator as witness-bearer. Lee-Popham considers poetry as an art engaging in acts of translation across a single language to reflect on the historical and contemporary contexts of imperialism and colonialization and welcome this process as a political practice. The article specifically examines a collection of poetry written by the author and entitled *Empires of the Everyday*.

This volume evidences the commitment of colleagues across Europe and beyond to the study of activism, action and agency, by placing translation at its core. Translation stands for not only difference but also diversity and for this it represents the ideal locus to negotiate actively, personally, collectively and conscientiously power dynamics and the opportunity for the vulnerable or the underrepresented to be supported and unveiled. The contributions to this volume not only offer valuable case studies, but they also articulate the desire to reach out to fellow colleagues, practitioners and stakeholders, by strengthening networks and building dialogues for a better and just society.<sup>1</sup>

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