

Studi e ricerche 30

e-ISSN 2610-9123  
ISSN 2610-993X

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# Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe

edited by

Bolette B. Blaagaard, Sabrina Marchetti,  
Sandra Ponzanesi, Shaul Bassi



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari





Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe

## **Studi e ricerche**

30



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e-ISSN 2610-9123

ISSN 2610-993X



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Venezia

**Edizioni Ca' Foscari** - Venice University Press

2023

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Edizioni Ca' Foscari | Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari  
Dorsoduro 3246 | 30123 Venezia | <http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it> | [ecf@unive.it](mailto:ecf@unive.it)

1st edition January 2023  
ISBN 978-88-6969-677-0 [ebook]

This project was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), Internationalization in the Humanities, PIN project *Postcolonial Intellectuals and their European Publics* (no. IG.18.014).



**Utrecht  
University**



Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe / edited by Bolette B. Blaagaard, Sabrina Marchetti, Sandra Ponzanesi, Shaul Bassi — 1. ed. — Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2023. — xxiv + 296 p.; 23 cm. — (Studi e ricerche; 30).

URL <https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni/libri/978-88-6969-504-9/>  
DOI <http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-677-0>

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## **Acknowledgments**

This book is the product of the network Postcolonial Intellectuals and Their Publics (PIN), an internationalisation in the humanities project funded by the NWO (Dutch Research Council) and led by Prof. Sandra Ponzanesi (Utrecht University). The editors would like to thank NWO for supporting the important collaboration, conferences and publications, which the network has produced. We would also like to thank the members of PIN for their invaluable contributions and support and their respective institutions.

The book is moreover produced in tandem with and on the basis of the conference *Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe* hosted by Ca' Foscari in beautiful Venice (26-28 May 2022). The editors extend a thank you to the warm and welcoming organising and running of the conference.

We would also like to thank all the contributors, the audience, and the keynote speakers at the conference, who made the conversations rich and thought-provoking. Special thanks to you to Prof. Mark Stein at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster and Prof. Max Silverman at the University of Leeds.

The editors thank their respective institutions: Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Utrecht University and Aalborg University. A special thank you to Alice Morino Baquette, who helped get us over the finish-line.

Last but not least, the editors thank Julia de Lange, who is a wizard at google docs, communication and organisation of complex people and fields, and has been a wonderful support beyond the call of duty.





## **Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe**

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### **Abstract**

*Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe* presents a collection of sixteen chapters that explore the themes of how migrants, refugees and citizens express and share their political and social causes and experiences through art and media. These expressions, which we term 'citizen media', arguably become a platform for postcolonial intellectuals as the studies pursued in this volume investigate the different ways in which previously excluded social groups regain public voice. The volume strives to understand the different articulations of migrants', refugees', and citizens' struggle against increasingly harsh European politics that allow them to achieve and empower political subjectivity in a mediated and creative space. In this way, the contributions in this volume present case studies of citizen media in the form of 'activistic art' or 'artivism' (Trandafoiu, Ruffini, Cazzato & Taronna, Koobak & Tali, Negrón-Muntaner), activism through different kinds of technological media (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi, Jedlowski), such as documentaries and film (Denić), podcasts, music and soundscapes (Romeo and Fabbri, Western, Lazzari, Huggan), and activism through writings from journalism to fiction (Longhi, Concilio, Festa, De Capitani). The volume argues that citizen media go hand in hand with postcolonial critique because of their shared focus on the deconstruction and decolonisation of Western logics and narratives. Moreover, both question the concept of citizen and of citizenship as they relate to the nation-state and explores the power of media as a tool for participation as well as an instrument of political strength. The book forwards postcolonial artivism and citizen media as a critical framework to understand the refugee and migrant situations in contemporary Europe.

**Keywords** Artivism. Citizen media. Media activism. Media publics. Postcolonial intellectuals.



**Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe**

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# Introduction to Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media

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**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Citizen Media and the Postcolonial Intellectual. – 3 Art and Citizen Media Practices. – 4 Social Media Activism, Media Publics, Activism & Story-Telling.

## 1 Introduction

As we are writing this introduction three political trends and events remind us of the persisting relevance and importance of postcolonial perspectives and their interrelationships with citizen media. Firstly, in early 2022 two European countries and former colonial powers, Denmark and the United Kingdom (UK) made proposals to establish detention centres for asylum seekers in Rwanda. The plan is that refugees and other migrants seeking access to the northern nations are flown to the East African country instead to have their applications processed. If they are successful, they are to remain in Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Denmark and the UK are planning to deter migrants from seeking asylum in the first place, shipping them out of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/20/denmark-in-talks-with-rwanda-over-processing-of-asylum-seekers>.

sight and earshot if they do. The cynical transportation of human beings to former colonial territories draws yet another trajectory and trace in the ever-expanding map of postcolonial Europe, sharpening the edges between the West and the rest. Secondly, post-socialist Europe is redefining its borders after Russia in February 2022 invaded its former ally and member of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, throwing not only Ukraine but most of Europe and the European Union into disarray and throwing into relief the historical relationships between the former Eastern bloc. From the war emerged the Ukrainian president Zelensky as a resourceful social media communicator, urging and imploring state leaders and individual European citizens alike to support the fight of and for his people. Because TikTok, YouTube and Instagram are traditionally technologies of the citizens, not state leaders, Zelensky challenged the epistemological genre by using these platforms to convey state politics and to win the support of former Western Europe (Jurkas 2022). And finally, in the past years Europe has seen a growing interest in the former settler colonies of the United States' racial politics. The civil rights organisation, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has organised chapters in Denmark, Italy, Germany and Poland (Milman et al. 2021), among others, producing phenomenological bridges of solidarity across the Atlantic using social and citizen media to empower their political voices and visibility.

With all and more of these events in mind, it seems impossible to know where the constantly changing and interjecting relationships between coloniality, migrancy, politics and media will go next. In this volume, we will not attempt such predictions, but instead engage in a dialogue with and explore the underpinnings of the shifting relationship of power between citizen activist art, story-telling, and (social) media that produce Europe's postcolonial publics. Citizen media arguably become a platform for postcolonial intellectuals as the studies pursued in this volume investigate the different ways in which previously excluded social groups regain public voice (Ponzanesi, Habed 2018, xli). We want to understand the different articulations of migrants', refugees', and citizens' struggle against increasingly harsh European politics that allow them to achieve and empower political subjectivity in a mediated and creative space. Doing this, we use the conceptualisation of the citizen and of citizenship as an achieved rather than received subjectivity, forged through political acts (Isin, Nielsen 2008). The contributions in this volume present case studies of citizen media in the form of activist art or activism (Trandafoiu, Ruffini, Cazzato and Taronna, Koobak and Tali, Negrón-Muntaner), activism through different kinds of media (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi, Jedlowski, Huggan), such as documentaries and film (Denić), podcasts, music and soundscapes (Romeo and Fabbri, Western, Lazzari, Huggan), and activism through writings from journalism to fiction (Longhi, Concilio, Festa, De Capitani). All these different expressions



of citizen media connect to the postcolonial reality of Europe - from cross-continent parades to post-socialist expressions of visual art, and refugee voices in England, among so much more. In this introduction, we frame the contributions in a discussion of what postcolonial citizen media is, how it signifies postcolonial Europe, and why it is an important field. We do this in this chapter by firstly discussing the concepts and their interrelationships of citizen media, citizen journalism, the postcolonial intellectual, and activism, and by arguing for the concepts' critical role in understanding the political subjectivity formations and achieved citizenship, which racialised minorities and refugees in Europe lay claim to. The second half of the introduction presents the many ways these claims are expressed in (social) media, art, and story-telling and theorised in this volume.

## 2 Citizen Media and the Postcolonial Intellectual

Citizen media is a contested and broadly conceptualised practice, which to us and others (Atton 2001; Downing 2011; Baker, Blaagaard 2016; Stavinoha 2019) encompasses political expressions through artistic, literary, popular, and digital media (Atton 2001). They are "the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations to effect aesthetic and socio-political change" (Baker, Blaagaard 2016, 16) as well as performative interventions as everyday acts of resistance (Stavinoha 2019, 1213). These diverse expressions of citizen media practice are indeed heterogeneous in style, contributions, and perspectives (Atton 2001, 15). Conceptualised in this manner, citizen media include the aim to not only affect socio-political but also aesthetic change and bring to the concept a creativity and artistic influence that underscore productions of political subjectivity and cultural citizenship. Citizen media, moreover, focuses on power, resistance, and hegemony, which the concept has in common with the work of social movements and activism in general (Downing 2001). Citizen media supports an epistemology from below; an embodied knowledge, which potentially circumvents the power of enunciation of state institutions, politics, mainstream media, and journalism by articulating demands for justice and solidarity. Citizen media practices, then, stem from counter-public and counter-hegemonic positions (Fraser 1991) and practices of resistance that allow voices to be heard beyond the public sphere of the institutionalised media and journalistic practice (see also Rae, Holman, Nethery 2018). Publics are discursively constructed spaces of political acts (Fraser 1991; Warner 2002) produced through citizens' (as conceptualised by Isin, Nielsen), intellectuals' and artists' interactions. While the concept of *the* public or the public sphere (Habermas 1989) is often referenced not only in political science and philosophy

but in the literature of journalism studies, because of its concern with the deliberative role of the journalistic media, counter-publics are spaces of contention and resistance to dominant discourse and *the* public. Counter-publics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (Fraser 1991, 67). Consequently, the discursive arenas of which Fraser speaks are potentially produced through citizen media. Counter-publics, moreover, take many forms depending on the political responsiveness and financial backing available. Groups with less resources or interest in political change may produce vernaculars, cultural bilingualism, or code-switching (Warner 2002, 86), in which they are bounded and secured by vernacular vocabularies and insider knowledge and understandings. Vernaculars are expressed in music and language but are not necessarily in direct dialogue with the dominant public or indeed other counter-publics. These kinds of counter-publics are “the living memory of the changing same” (Gilroy 1993a, 198). Producing and reproducing themselves, memory and lived culture in these *enclaved* publics (Squires 2002) redefine what is authentic and what is a legitimate speaking position.

Due to the connections between counter-public activism and citizen media, the latter lends itself to postcolonial critique. Both citizen media and postcolonial (intellectual) thinking focus on the deconstruction and decolonisation of Western logics and narratives, and both question the concept of the citizen and of citizenship as they relate to the nation-state and explores the power of media as a tool for participation as well as an instrument of political strength (Blaagaard 2020, 311). Edward Said (1997) argued that counter-reading history – reading historical narratives from below – may serve as a conscious rejection of modernity’s teleological and successive historical account by acknowledging that knowledge is always situational, interpreted, and an expression of interest.

Postcolonial intellectuals (Ponzanesi, Habed 2018) offer important perspectives in the debates on citizen media as they propose civic engagements through intellectual labour, but also through participation in social movements, artistic productions, and other creative practices. We envision the notion of the intellectual not as a normative concept, of the solitary, charismatic figure that speaks truth to power (Foucault, Deleuze 1977; Said 1996), but rather as a political act of belonging to multiple spheres, engaging in collective actions, and transversal alliances. So what makes intellectuals postcolonial is not an accident of birth or being the spokesperson for disenfranchised groups, but as Engin Isin has so cogently written:

What makes postcolonial intellectuals postcolonial is [the] understanding of their location in imperial-colonial orders and what makes them intellectual is this understanding of their location in

knowledge-power regimes. [...] Postcolonial Intellectuals traverse both dominant and dominated positions. [...] Perhaps then postcolonial intellectuals are neither universal nor specific but transversal political subjects, always crossing borders and orders, constituting solidarities, networks and connections. Traversing both fields of knowledge-power and imperial-colonial orders is their condition of possibility and *modus operandi*. (Isin 2018, xiii)

Although intellectuals have always relied on communities, networks and coalitions in order to represent and uphold particular ideals and values, the role of the intellectual was often perceived as a titanic one that coalesced mostly around white male figures. While this myth and misconception has been amply debunked by showing the richness of intellectual figures, movements and networks around the world, from colonial to anticolonial and postcolonial formation there is still a tendency to interpret the intellectual as a 'figure' elevated above the masses and endowed with exceptional skills and abilities in communication and dissemination, along with being blessed with attributes such as charisma, popularity and fandom, often approaching the realms of celebrity and star status (Ponzanesi 2021).

Through citizen media we revisit the figure of the intellectual as belonging to multiple constituencies and articulating marginal as well as institutional positions. So, far from being in decline, the figure of the intellectual has shifted towards more inclusive and multi-sited forms of citizen media activities. Increasingly part of intellectual movements, protests, and activism that are not necessarily located at the heart of Western nations, intellectuals reach out to new audiences through new social media platforms and diversified outlets calling for new counter-publics.

### 3 Art and Citizen Media Practices

The epistemology and the dissemination supporting the postcolonial intellectuals' increasing importance to European discourse produce particular knowledge practices and productions. The postcolonial critique of Western hegemonic knowledge claims calls for methods of deconstruction and decolonisation such as *counter-reading* and *border-thinking* (Mignolo 2013). The borders in Walter Mignolo's border-thinking theory are not geographical but epistemic. Mignolo asserts the necessity of decolonising the Western epistemologies and insisting on committing epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2013, 136-7). Using citizen media to this end, of course, is a precarious undertaking because of the technologies' connections to major multinational corporations and their concerning reproduction of colonial social and financial structures. Postcolonial activism such as literature, film,

music, art, curation, games, and fashion may resist the Western commercial logic of consumption of the other by critiquing, mimicking and mocking dominant and oppressive culture as well as insisting on other forms of communication besides textuality (Gilroy 1993a, 77-8; Gilroy 1993b; see also Blaagaard 2020). However, these practices also may easily fall prey to co-optation and the cannibalistic consumer logic according to which minority cultures are displayed for commercial purposes. Sandra Ponzanesi (2014) believes that it is in a space in-between these binary positions of analysis that postcolonial critique is found, teetering on the razor's edge between political acts and capitalist co-optation (Blaagaard, Allan 2016, 67). Postcolonial critique enables a possibility of understanding consumer logics of digital media and activism, argues Ponzanesi (2020).

Following the discussion above, postcolonial citizen media is a subaltern, political act (Isin, Nielsen 2008) of the postcolonial intellectual as discussed and defined above in which the "citizen enacts her citizenship [...] so that her citizenship is achieved rather than received" (Blaagaard 2018, 39). They produce political subjectivity where none is granted and broadens the political act to encompass expressive acts beyond the journalistic principles and protocols of citizen journalism's formats and distribution channels - and in effect beyond the dominant public sphere (Allan, Thorsen 2009). While citizen journalism adheres and relates to publication formats of the journalistic practice, citizen media takes the form of street art (Blaagaard, Mollerup 2020), performances (Hughes, Parry 2016), film (Ponzanesi 2016), and digital media posts and interactions by refugees and migrants (Stavinoha 2019). Digital media promise a potential for increased visibility of minorities and marginalised communities and their connective qualities draw up new cartographies of visibility and implications of political acts and achieved citizenship. Postcolonial citizen media, then, may "constitute a form of active citizenship" (Harcup 2011, 17-18) or *creative* citizenship by intermediating assertions to claims to human rights and justice (Stavinoha 2019). Engaging in artistic performances or activism, postcolonial citizen media "uses vigorous actions, participation and aesthetic strategies such as documentation and fictionalization as means of enabling dialog and achieving political goals" (Reestorff 2015, 16). As in the case of postcolonial cinema, more broadly in postcolonial activism it is not the themes of the art that makes it postcolonial. Rather it is the way "it engages with history, subjectivity, epistemology, and the political ramifications of all of these" (Ponzanesi, Waller 2011, 1) by enabling counter-readings and border-thinking practices. It is in other words, the "understanding of their location in imperial-colonial orders and what makes them [postcolonial] intellectual" (Isin 2018, xiii). By means of critical deconstruction and decolonisation of European politics, postcolonial activism becomes a critical lens or framework

to understand the refugee situations in Europe or postcolonial expressions (Zebracki 2020).

#### **4 Social Media Activism, Media Publics, Activism & Story-Telling**

This book is divided into four sections which each presents and discusses a particular relationship in European postcolonial publics today between citizen media, activism, and artistic expressions concerning issues of coloniality and migrancy.

The first section on ‘Postcolonial Social Media Activism’ shows how different types of media and platforms enable active citizenship. Lillie Chouliaraki and Omar Al-Ghazzi introduce the section with their chapter “Citizen media as flesh witnessing: Embodied testimonies of war in western news journalism”. In it they argue that the use of User Generated Content at times of war and as testimonial material in the news storytelling of western media is an act of media witnessing, which presents conflict as a scene of suffering and relies on Western news platforms to amplify such suffering as both *authentic* and *morally urgent* story-telling to news publics. In the chapter “Rhythm - Relay - Relation”, Tom Western explores the activism of sound and radio broadcasts in which he and colleagues take part. Their work advocates for employment rights and opportunities for refugees, organising workshops in sound recording and editing. The workshops in turn enable refugees and descendants a very literal voice through citizen media. Taking his starting point in Greece, Western explores how “media activism generate transformative transmissions and anti-border broadcasts”. Sound and podcasts are also the empirical topic of the chapter by Caterina Romeo and Giulia Fabbri entitled “Podcasting Race: Participatory Media Activism in Postcolonial Italy”. The authors focus on podcasts, which have increasingly attracted attention for being both a tool for global mobilisation and a site for cultural production. Taking the case of podcasting in contemporary Italy as a starting point, they thoroughly examine the production of podcasts by racialised, female subjects as a way to “regain authority over their own lives and authorship of their own stories” as well as “create awareness and connections in the Black Italian community”. Giuseppe Lazzari borrows the term “methodologies of Blackness” (Baker Josephs, Risam 2021) to question the emergence of artistic and cultural practices that can be seen as shaping always new forms of postcolonial publics in Italy, since the 1990s. In the chapter “Methodologies of Blackness in Italy: Past, Present, and Futures”, Lazzari looks at the transformations that have taken place in this realm where the use of literary fiction has gradually been replaced by the use of multimedia and transdisciplinary projects, with an impact on the size and the type of audience.

Whereas the first section investigates and discusses soundscapes and vernacular expressions, the second section presents 'Postcolonial Media Publics' on screens and in cultural practices, showing the historical significance in the story-telling we do in cinema, art, politics, and everyday practices. Opening this section, Frances Negrón-Muntaner in her chapter "Cinema as Inquiry: On Art, Knowledge, and Justice" considers the question of how temporal media like film or video is a mode of inquiry that produces knowledge that works in particular ways and has particular effects, including the possibility of imagining justice. In the chapter "Epistemic Decolonisation of Migration: Digital Witnessing of Crisis and Borders in *For Sama*", Natica Denić focuses on the media of documentary filmmaking. Analysing the documentary *For Sama*, Denić argues for an epistemology from below and the inclusion of migrant voices in European crises discourses. Centring on the Syrian documentary in which the protagonists and filmmakers navigate the common-place violence and trauma, or crisis-ordinariness, Denić shows that migrant voices and visions invite "a heterogeneity of knowledge" pluralising our understanding of crisis and borders. In "Serious laughs: Blackness, humour and social media in contemporary France", Alessandro Jedlowski examines the special role played by Black comedians in the broader French debates on the country's colonial past and the tensions between universalist and multiculturalist models of society. In a public sphere in which they have traditionally had even less space than the marginalised North African minorities, a new generation of influential Black comedians use YouTube and other social media platforms as key instruments for the promotion of their career. By focusing on the work of Christian Nsankete (Dycosh), Fadily Camara, and Jean-Claude Muaka, Jedlowski considers the alternative postcolonial publics that the work of these comedians is constituting. Luigi Cazzato and Annarita Taronna focus on mediatic activism connected to the Palestinian question in their chapter "Decolonial Mediatic Artist Engagement and the Palestinian Question". Hip-hop activist singers, networks of artists, cultural workers and participatory journalists are explored as examples of popular resistance. The authors focus on their use of symbolic vocabulary to evoke feelings of struggle and togetherness and, in so doing, produce counter-public discourses.

The third section deals with 'Postcolonial Activism' and moves from the mediated to the visual, conceptual, and embodied realm of art. In the chapter "Dislocation and Creative Citizenship: Romanian Diasporic Artists in Europe", Ruxandra Trandafoiu introduces us to the post-socialist and postcolonial work of Romanian diasporic artists. These artists, argues Trandafoiu, work 'in-between' the historical and ideological periods of socialism and capitalism positioning them in "perpetual marginality" and giving rise to creative citizenship. In the chapter "*The Walk*: A Participatory Performative Action

Across the Borders of Europe”, Rosaria Ruffini describes the participatory artistic action *The Walk*, performed by an international network of artists, activists and citizens from Turkey to the UK during 2021. The walk was taken with a gigantic puppet named Amal, who – on her journey across Europe – is accompanied by a very heterogeneous public (children, activists, migrants and the virtual public which follows on social media) that gather to support her “political body” as representative of all subjects affected by intersectional discriminations because of their origin, gender and age. Thanks to this performance, the borders of Europe are conceived “as a resource and not an impediment; as a site of negotiation and encounter; as a space for artistic and social experimentation”. Redi Koobak and Margaret Tali write in “Rendering Race through a Paranoid Postsocialist Lens: Activist Curating and Public Engagement in the Postcolonial Debate in Eastern Europe” about the heated public debate on racial representation and colonial history that arose around the Kumu Art Museum’s exhibition *Rendering Race* that took place in Estonia in 2021. The chapter outlines the activist curatorial strategies used by American art historian Bart Pushaw, who curated the exhibition, and analyses the operation and the public engagement that the strategies provoked. Finally, in “Bowie in Berlin, or, the Postcolonial Intellectual Unmasked”, Graham Huggan uses Bowie to challenge the blandishments that accompany conventional descriptions of the postcolonial intellectual, referring primarily to his years in Berlin. Bowie’s extraordinary life and work, and the media machinery that surrounded it, arguably contest the so-called ‘demotic turn’ through which increasing intellectual authority has been given to ordinary citizens.

The fourth and final section focuses on ‘Postcolonial Story-Telling’ and explores the different ways in which writing – journalistic, literary, and hybrid modalities – transpose spatial and temporal spaces. Journalist Vittorio Longhi argues in “The African Descendant, an ‘Invisible Man’ to the Media” that the mainstream media and the publishing industry should be more aware of the difficulties and inequalities produced through stereotyping of people of African descent. The media industry should commit to implementing diversity and inclusivity policies and practices within their organisations. Making African descendants visible and vocal in the media would ensure fairer representation within the public sphere, and it would help to put an end to racial stereotyping, discrimination and violence. Lucio De Capitani writes about “The Refugee Tales Project as Transmedia Activism and the Poetics of Listening: Towards Decolonial Citizenship”. De Capitani argues that the *Refugee Tales*, written and published with professional writers, allow the refugees “a chance to perform a critical form of citizenship”. The tales are part of a performative project in which they are read aloud on a walk across the English countryside inviting new forms of listening too. From the physical countryside to

digital online environment, Maria Festa looks at the literary work of three authors in her chapter “Migrant Multimodal Narratives: From Blogs And Print Media To Youtube” to show how new media technologies are increasingly used as a means for people to tell their stories, so that their voices can be used and become advocacy tools for their cause. The result is a very hybrid narrative act, in which various multimodal forms - written, spoken, visual or pictorial- converge in describing migrants’ views and experiences. Carmen Concilio follows in the intellectual footsteps of American-Nigerian writer Teju Cole. In the chapter “‘Following’ Teju Cole’s ‘black portraitures’: On zigzagging between (digital) literature, photography, art history, music and much more...”, Concilio weaves a trajectory that zigzags between Cole’s writing about Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin’s writings and meetings with Europe. Concilio shows how authors such as Fanon, Baldwin, and Glissant remain relevant to present postcolonial debates in the hands of Cole.

The chapters are collected in this volume in such a way that enhances each chapter’s argument and empirical trajectory. Together they show rather than tell a story of how the postcolonial publics are rife with citizen media expressions from below in the face of European consumerism, media stereotyping, politics, and postcolonialism.

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**Postcolonial Publics:  
Art and Citizen Media in Europe**



## **Section 1**

### Postcolonial Social Media Activism



# Citizen media as Flesh Witnessing: Embodied Testimonies of War in Western News Journalism

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**Abstract** This chapter critiques the privileging of verification in the ways user-generated content is incorporated in western reporting of global South conflicts. We argue that the exclusive concern with truth regimes takes for granted and profits off the precarious existence of those who provide western news with the material for visual news storytelling. We introduce a view of citizen media as flesh witnessing, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by mobile phones, circulate in global news environments as appeals to attention and action. We offer an analysis of the narrative strategies by which flesh witnessing is imbued with truth-telling authority. These are: meta-discursive, where the truth status of citizen media constitutes the newsworthiness of the story itself, curated, where its truth status is awarded through digital curation of personalised testimonies; and non-narrative, where the truth of citizen media is presented as the open-ended process of shared fact-checking.

**Keywords** Citizen media. Flesh witnessing. Conflict news. User-generated content. Syria war.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Citizen Media and War Journalism. – 3 Citizen Media as a Socio-Technical and Geopolitical Practice. – 4 Citizen Media as Techno-Hermeneutic Practice. – 5 Citizen Media as Flesh Witnessing: Three Western News Re-Narrations. – 5.1 Meta-Discursive Witnessing. – 5.2 Curated Witnessing. – 5.3 Non-Narrative Witnessing. – 6 The Neo-Coloniality of Western News.

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Parts of this chapter were previously published in Chouliaraki, L.; Al-Ghazzi, O. (2022). "Beyond Verification: Flesh Witnessing and the Significance of Embodiment in Conflict News". *Journalism*, 23(3), 649-67.

## 1 Introduction

Citizen media refer to the use of digital media in their particular capacity to act as amplifiers of people's voices at the service of a civic cause – whether this is #MeToo confessions of gendered trauma on Twitter or real-time mobile phone footage of authoritarian violence on TikTok. While the term may not travel well across contexts with its nation-state and democracy-centric connotations, we use it in this article to capture digital testimonies by witnesses of war in global South contexts. Relying heavily on mobile phone content that can help spread these voices across the globe, citizen media have been hailed as a breakthrough in war and conflict reporting. Nonetheless, in the context of historical power structures that perpetuate the dominance of western voices in this global flow of news, the use of citizen media in war reporting poses new questions. What kinds of testimony are voiced by witnesses of war in global South contexts? How exactly do such testimonial voices get contextualised in western news platforms? What are the concerns and priorities of such news platforms and how do these impact on the re-telling of citizen media testimonies? What are the advantages and, importantly, the costs of western news stories for citizen media testimonies of war? It is these questions we explore in this paper. Taking our point of departure on examples of mobile phone content from the war in Syria, we theorise citizen media testimonials as acts of media witnessing, which present conflict as a scene of suffering and rely on western<sup>1</sup> news platforms to amplify such suffering as both *authentic* and *morally urgent* storytelling to news publics of the global North (Frosh, Pinchevski 2008).

While radio and television had already turned news journalism into spaces of testimony, in the past (Ellis 2000), mobile phones and digital media have nonetheless complicated the imperatives of media witnessing for authenticity and urgency, in two ways. Firstly, the imperative of truth is challenged as such media bypass the truth-telling authority of the professional and so pose the epistemological problem of *who speaks*; and secondly, the moral demand for urgency is intensified as citizen media often present war suffering in

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<sup>1</sup> Our use of the term 'western' here signals a conception of the global order, including the institutions of global journalism, as divided by historical relationships of neo-colonial power between Europe and North America and the global South. This division between North and South, however, is not about delineating fixed locations and 'essential geographies' but rather about signalling legacies of power that dialectically constitute and differentiate geographical space through "historicized discourses, imaginaries and material inequalities, including imperialist ones" (Dosekun 2015, 961). In the context of our study, what this understanding of the 'North' and the 'South' draws our attention to is, what Judith Butler (2004) terms, "ungrievable lives" – lives that are subjected to structural forms of violence but are refused the possibility to appear in public through, what analysis identifies them to be, a set of radical displacements and erasures.



real-time and so pose the question about *what will be the fate of the speaker*. It is this tension between *suspicion* and *urgency*, as the two put new pressures on news story-telling, that guides our analytical questions. Drawing on a variety of stories from well-established liberal news outlets in the global North, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *The Guardian* about the conflict in Syria during the past decade,<sup>2</sup> 2011-21, we ask: what are the truth conditions under which citizen media testimonies find their way in legacy media? And what are the implications of these truth conditions for the moral urgency of citizen media?

We start by situating citizen media in the field of Journalism Studies, where these media emerge as techno-social constructs of emotional and moral value to platform journalism and where they are discussed as vehicles of fake news and as affective story-telling that optimises audience engagement. While this debate around User Generated Content's (UGC) truth status is important, we argue that it short-circuits the *urgency of human suffering* inherent in the act of witnessing. To go beyond this debate, we introduce a view of citizen media as *flesh witnessing*, that is as embodied and mobile testimonies of vulnerable others that, enabled by mobile phones, circulate in global news environments as appeals to attention and action; and we subsequently offer an analysis of the narrative strategies by which flesh witnessing is imbued with truth-telling authority. We exemplify three of these authenticating strategies: *meta-discursive*, where the truth status of citizen media constitutes the newsworthiness of the story itself, *curated*, where its truth status is awarded through the digital curation of personalised testimonies; and *non-narrative*, where the truth of citizen media is presented as the open-ended process of distributed and shared fact-checking.

In light of our analysis, we reflect on the moral and political implications that western journalism's one-sided concern with verification bears on citizen media testimonies, namely that its story-telling co-opts the emotional dimension of flesh witnessing – its focus on child innocence, heroic martyrdom or the data aesthetics of destruction – while it downplays its urgency by marginalising or eras-

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**2** Our cases were selected from a data bank of Syrian conflict stories collected in the past decade and employed at different empirical projects by the authors; this consists of visual and narrative online material from major western news outlets, including the ones used for analysis here. Our sampling strategy, in this article, was based on what Flyvebjerg calls, "information-oriented" case study, where we searched for material on the basis of our working hypothesis that UGC is entangled in processes of institutional verification, thereby filtering our search through a focus on modes of verification available in the data bank; and we selected our final three cases for their capacity to showcase those processes and their implications in the most comprehensive and lucid way possible, or as Flyvebjerg puts it, for their capacity to help us "maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases" (2006, 34).

ing concern for the bodies of non-western witnesses. This privileging of verification, we conclude, is a neo-colonial practice of western news-making insofar as it takes for granted and profits off the precarious existence of those who provide it with its visual story-telling. Verification, we recommend, must be combined with an unequivocal acknowledgement of the embodied voices of war as testimonies of the flesh whose often mortal vulnerability is the very condition of possibility upon which western broadcasting rests.

## **2 Citizen Media and War Journalism**

Citizen media as testimonial practice has been theorised both as a techno-social and as a geopolitical practice, which produces affective and moral value for platform journalism – on top of being financially profitable. While the field of Journalism Studies (JS) takes both these dimensions of citizen media into account, its exclusive focus on the latter, namely the ways specific (geo)political interests contribute to disinformation through such media, tends to ignore citizens’ embodied calls for recognition in contexts of war and conflict.

## **3 Citizen Media as a Socio-Technical and Geopolitical Practice**

Citizen media as a techno-social practice refers to the spread of mobile phones through which ordinary people can instantly film, upload and circulate content on social media platforms. Twitter’s capacity for “real-time public, many-to-many broadcasting” (Murthy 2018, 11), for example, has made it possible for users to partake in, what Hermida calls, a global “awareness system” that supports journalists in discovering “trends or issues hovering under the news radar” (2010, 302); in so doing, the platform has helped make war hyper-visible (Mortensen 2017). In the context of platform journalism, where news content is algorithmically primed for profit by the big tech (Bell et al. 2017), such real-time, emotional content is increasingly privileged over slower content gathered through traditional sourcing and fact-checking practices (Waisbord 2018). At the same time, as foreign correspondents are gradually decreasing, such practices of “social media newsgathering” (Johnson 2016) have become an indispensable dimension of conflict reporting, used to “fill the void often left by the professional journalists” (Allan 2017, 101).

The value of citizen media, however, does not only lie in their capacity to inform but also in their power to produce emotional and moral responses. The emotional power of citizen media is the power of bodies-at-risk appealing to global audiences from within contexts

of violence. By mobilising the body in first-person accounts of grief or resistance from scenes of violence, the affective power of citizen media is not just about dramatic effect but is, in itself, a form of truth-telling: an embodied sense of truth that relies on the lived experience of citizens as the most authentic account of war violence (Wall, Zahed 2015). Reporting citizen media as the lived experience of a witness lends to western news a 'martyrical' conception of truth, which stems precisely from the impassioned claim of "one who attests to the truth by suffering" (Mortensen 2011, 9). Even though the authenticating role of emotion in professional journalism is not new (Chouliaraki 2006), citizen media testimonies goes further than mass media in offering "an emotional immersion within the news event" (Wall, Zahed 2015) that makes them "widely valued by both news professionals and audiences", as Wahl-Joergensen claims, "and strategically used by activists and non-governmental organisations" (2019, 66). This uptake of citizen media by activists further suggests that, embedded in its truth value, there also lies a moral value in these testimonies (Pantti 2016), insofar as it is the felt intensity of corporeal suffering or imminent death that comes to pose the question of 'what to do' in the face of humanitarian tragedy.

This link between watching distant suffering and doing something about it, however, is not only part of a professional ethos of civic responsibility among journalists and activists (Linfield 2010; Hariman, Lucaites 2015), but is further situated in a geopolitical order and its own historical relations of power between the global North and the global South (Al-Ghazzi 2019; Chouliaraki 2013). The role of citizen media in shaping war journalism is here part of post-Cold War western discourse introducing a civilian-centred approach to global governance. Associated with transformations in the conduct of war and its spread into city spaces, this geopolitical order advocates, as Marlier and Crawford suggest, for "an evaluation of the issues from the point of view of those seeking or needing support, rather than those who may be considering intervention", thereby elevating the figure of the civilian into the exemplary voice of the victim in contemporary warfare (2013, 398). Challenging these claims of a compassionate western morality, however, is the fact that witnesses of war from the global South find themselves marginalised in this space of geopolitical power, always speaking from the tenuous position of both the protagonist and the reporter of their stories (Al-Ghazzi 2021). This raises questions about whose voice and what war are being amplified in the news platforms of the global North. In the context of the late twentieth century 'War on Terror', for instance, racialised bodies and voices were placed within a punitive and exclusionary national security framework that treated them as terrorists (Vlopp 2002). More recently, however, during the 2011 Arab uprisings, this power dynamics between western media and Middle Eastern and North Af-

rican actors became more flexible to satisfy new foreign policy objectives (Chouliaraki 2015). Arab media became divided along political lines between those that appropriated the racist ‘War on Terror’ discourse to undermine activists and protestors as terrorists; and others that, in line with western media agendas, attempted to amplify the voices of resistance in countries such as Syria and Libya (Harb 2011). The incorporation of citizen voice in pan-Arab broadcast media in the early stages of the Libya conflict (2011), for instance, were catalytic in sensitising audiences and, as Wollenberg and Pack argued, in legitimising western intervention: “even the NATO decision to intervene on humanitarian grounds”, they say, “was influenced by this powerful new mechanism made up of the alliance of social media and pan-Arab channels” (2013, 197).

Citizen media, to summarise, operates as a journalistic resource at the intersection of techno-social and ethico-political developments that renew legacy journalism in the global North through the use of citizen voices while also satisfying social media platforms and their commercial imperatives for real-time and emotion-driven content. At the same time, however, this confluence introduces, what Ekstrom and Westlund call, “power dependencies” between journalism and platforms, as the latter “dislocate” the authority that journalists traditionally held over the truth of the news they produced, thereby posing new questions about “the forms of knowledge news journalism claims to provide, and how such knowledge is produced, validated and justified” (Ekstrom, Westlund 2019, 263). The suspicion towards citizen media, intensified by western governments’ weaponisation of ordinary people’s voices to justify their own military campaigns, refers precisely to this “epistemological dislocation”, which pits the need for the journalistic verification of content against platforms’ demand for fast-moving, affective news. What we explore next, then, is how the Journalism Studies field (JS) is addressing this tension between suspicion and urgency in citizen media and their appeal to global North audiences for attention and action.

#### 4 Citizen Media as Techno-Hermeneutic Practice

Two arguments within the JS field are germane to the debate around news authenticity: the argument on social media platforms as spaces of disinformation and the argument on digital technologies and AI as a means of content verification. The first, a *political economic* argument, focuses on the negative effect that the business model of social media platforms has on the authenticity of news journalism (Bakir, McStay 2018). As this model’s emphasis on media metrics optimises virality rather than validity of content, it predictably makes journalism vulnerable to truth manipulation. It is, at this point, that

the platforms' preference not for source credibility but for popular, emotion-driven news implicates war journalism in broader geopolitical contestations over truth, as various war actors compete for hegemony over their narratives. Within this "ever-faster news cycle", where the verification of actors "is considered more demanding and time-consuming", Ekstrom and Westlund admit, "the risk of incorrect data being published increases" (2019, 260), fashioning an ecology of distrust and raising questions about who to believe and whose emotional appeal truly deserves a response.

It is in this complex journalistic landscape of rival truth claims, where legacy journalism still acts as an institutional truth-teller yet does so under intense competition, that the second argument of the JS field, the *institutional newsroom* one, is positioned. If the political economy one is about suspicion over platforms and their sources, this argument is about the ways in which platformed news simultaneously present themselves as a cure to disinformation - through developing their own technical verification hubs, enabling user reporting of fake news, or employing third-party fact-checking actors, like Bellingcat and Stopfake.org, that can verify their UGC sources (Seo 2020). What these technologies aspire to do is to compensate for journalists' lack of, what Usher (2020) calls, their "place-based authority", by bringing them closer to that scene of action and, through scrutiny of citizen media content, helping them to re-assign truth value to their news stories. It is, specifically, computational toolkits that, together with local sources, make it possible for journalists to combine the hermeneutic epistemology of the traditional newsroom with the new technical expertise of "digital forensics" (Thurman 2017). Similarly to interpretatively-accomplished impartiality, digital forensics also relies on its own "symbolic architecture of impartiality" (Bélaïr-Gagnon 2013) - one, nonetheless, that merges the former with new computational routines and capabilities of truth-finding.

To summarise, the techno-hermeneutic epistemology of the digital newsroom has enabled platform journalism to appropriate citizen media into authenticated re-narrations of ordinary voices within its own story-telling of conflict. The term 'arrested war' refers precisely to this "appropriation and control of previously chaotic dynamics [of voice] by mainstream media and, at a slower pace, government and military policy-makers" (Hoskins, O'Loughlin 2015, 1320), as all these actors have come to employ new practices of newsgathering and verification that sift disinformation out of news production. What remains unaddressed in this literature, however, is the dual question of how the news' digital forensics is integrated into news story-telling as well as how this might impact the moral imperatives that lie at the heart of UGC as civilian testimony. What do the new stories of 'arrested war' look like and how do they accommodate the urgent appeals of embodied voices into their narratives? It is to these questions that we now turn.

## 5 Citizen Media as Flesh Witnessing: Three Western News Re-Narrations

In order to address these questions, we begin by grounding citizen media onto the body as an existential dimension of ordinary testimonies of conflict, what we theorise as *flesh witnessing*. The starting point of this theorisation marks a return to the vulnerability of the body and its radical openness to violence, particularly in contexts of war and conflict, reminding us that digital testimony from such contexts is not only visual information that can be ‘arrested’, that is fact-checked and re-narrated, but also, crucially, a sensory experience that captures the dramatic urgency of (the witnesses’) bodies under imminent threat: “bodies carrying cues of either impending death or its own fragility”, in Zelizer’s words (2010, 171).

The term flesh witnessing was first used to refer to the authority acquired by soldiers’ lived experience of war in the early twentieth century as they “learned their wisdom with their flesh” (Harare 2008, 7) – a form of authority that competed with the eye-witnessing authority of those who read about war in the press and in propaganda ‘back home’. Our conceptualisation of the term today refers to ordinary people whose testimonies of imminent bodily threat take place via mobile phones (or other camera interfaces) and circulate globally through real-time uploading and sharing across digital platforms. Rather than focusing on soldiers’ experiences, then, our interest lies instead in reflecting on the media hierarchy of whose ‘flesh’ matters enough to render their voice believable in global news coverage.

It is these flesh testimonies of life and death that we organise our conceptual vocabulary around. Our starting point is that the dislocation of professional routines of authenticity is no longer only an *epistemological* problem but also, for our purposes, a *narrative* problem that is perennial to the affective and moralising force of the news; as Al-Ghazzi observes, the story-telling of legacy journalism, entangled as it is in the power relations of western media industries, privileges binary “cultural constructions” of civilian testimonies that are “simultaneously hyped up as the ultimate truth teller and/or dismantled as an intrinsically helpless victim of manipulation” (2019, 3226). Caught in this ‘binary of truth or lie’, we next demonstrate, western news stories situate flesh witnessing across a range of aesthetic/narrative registers, each of which ‘arrests’ UGC in different ways; and by use of our empirical examples, we critically interrogate three of those registers of flesh witnessing: *meta-discursive*, *curated* and *non-narrative*.

## 5.1 Meta-Discursive Witnessing

By ‘meta-discursive’ we refer to news stories where the very question of UGC authentication constitutes the newsworthy part of the story – ‘meta-discursive’ denoting precisely how truth-finding discourse is the thematic focus of the news piece itself. Exemplary of this category are two articles in *NYT* (“Girl Posting to Twitter from Aleppo Gains Sympathy But Doubts Follow”, 7 December, 2016)<sup>3</sup> and *The WP* (“In Aleppo Disinformation War, a 7-year-old Girl Prompts a Fact-check”, 14 December 2016),<sup>4</sup> both of which focus on Bana al-Abed’s tweets during the eastern Aleppo siege in autumn 2016. The two articles employ similar narrative tropes to problematise the authenticity of her UGC: i) their centring of the child-figure as an ambivalent force of UGC authentication; ii) their framing of this ambivalence through a vocal assemblage, that is the presentation of various authority voices that aim at attaching impartiality to the story; and iii) their use of a narrativised digital forensics to justify the newsworthiness of Bana’s testimonies without fully resolving the question of their truthfulness.

The child-figure visually frames both articles through the introductory photograph of seven-year-old Bana holding her colourful “I love you my friends” painting (*WP*), and through a video compilation of her twitter account footage portraying some of her daily life moments. While it is these constructions of “pure childhood” that authenticate Bana as the pure or “archetypal witness” (Al-Ghazzi 2019, 3226), Bana’s truth-telling capacity is nonetheless compromised by her use of social media. This is because her digital interventions undermine her status as an innocent truth-teller and position her instead as a “viral child” (Trezise 2020) – a figure not only of agentive self-representation but also of dubious co-optation by others. While, for instance, the use of English in her twitter account is justified as being “aided by her English-teacher mother” (*WP*), nonetheless this dual authorship has “raised some questions of veracity and authenticity” (*NYT*), with “anonymous online trolls [...] setting up fake accounts in an attempt to discredit and mock her” (*WP*). Caught up in this ambivalence, Bana’s vulnerability is, throughout the articles, challenged by a narrative that turns those tweets into an object of suspicion and analysis. In summary, rather than recognising the profound precariousness of Bana’s everyday existence, this register’s preoccupation with verification alone turns her voice into the ob-

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/world/middleeast/aleppo-twitter-girl-syria.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/14/in-alep-pose-misinformation-war-a-7-year-old-girl-prompts-a-fact-check/>.

ject of epistemic scrutiny and disembodies the fragile corporeality of her testimonies.

## 5.2 Curated Witnessing

The curated register utilises witnesses' digital story-telling to illustrate the conditions of conflict reporting on the ground. Multi-media narratives are here edited and archived on legacy platforms as self-standing categories that have a dual value: they work as authenticating material from the Syrian conflict while also providing affective accounts of the costs of conflict reporting. Exemplary of this category are two videos in the *NYT* ("Dying to be Heard: Reporting Syria's War", 30 November 2016)<sup>5</sup> and *The Guardian* ("The Syrian Teenager Tweeting the Horror of Life in Ghouta", 24 February 2018),<sup>6</sup> which put on the spotlight two such reporters living in Syria. The *NYT* video combines UGC with *NYT* content and voiceover to offer a biographical account of nurse-student-turned-reporter, 29-year-old Hadi Abdallah, during the Syria conflict; *The Guardian* relies on 15-year-old Muhammad Najem's content, from tweets to selfies and videos, framed by the newspaper's text and voiceover. We understand both these practices to be variations of, what Wall and Zahed call, the "collaborative news clip", a news product that incorporates UGC into legacy platforms through participatory practices of shared gate-keeping framing (2014, 3).

The sense of authenticity in these clips is constructed through two tropes of digital story-telling: i) content curation, which contextualises the material within the professional editorial logic of legacy news; and ii) narrative personalisation, which grounds UGC onto the individual experience of the flesh witness. Part of this curation process is the captioning of the videos through narratives of, what we call, 'lasting newsworthiness': "Muhammad Najem, a 15-year-old resident of the devastated rebel enclave on the outskirts of Damascus, is using social media to share videos of daily bombardments" (*The Guardian*, 24 February 2018); as opposed to breaking news, which is event-driven and works through constant updates, lasting newsworthiness is brand-driven and works through a longer-term temporality that reflects the dual values of platform journalism: civic-mindedness, where conflict reporting is shown as a heroic endeavour of individuals in the line of fire, and profit, where sensational content maximises

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000004777148/dying-to-be-heard-reporting-syria-war-aleppo.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2018/feb/24/the-syrian-teenager-tweeting-the-horror-of-life-in-ghouta-video>.



es popularity metrics and revenue for the platform. Personalisation works through a narrative focus on the 'I' behind the footage, for instance, "Hello, I am Muhammed Najem, I am 15 years old" in *The Guardian* video; and through a emphasis on the witnesses' embodied presence, which, in both cases, is explicitly narrated as "about-to-die" bodies (Zelizer 2010): the Hadi Abdullah video is introduced with the title "Dying to be Heard" and Muhammad is shown to stand in an area under active bombardment - and it is precisely their entanglement in deadly near-misses that such about-to-die bodies make claims of unmediated access to the conflict.

Despite the affective force of personalised testimony, however, the category of curated witnessing is still traversed by ambivalence. This happens in two ways. Firstly, curated UGC is placed in 'video' archive sections of the Middle East category of the news sites, requiring extra search work to be accessed and marking a clear boundary between the visibility granted to professional reporting and that of ordinary witnesses - what Carlson calls journalists' "boundary work" between the two (2016). Secondly, narrative personalisation focuses on the individual only and so decontextualises the suffering of ordinary witnesses from its broader contexts of precarious reporting, including the responsibility of western news networks to support and protect the potentially lethal yet invisible labour of the witnesses they profit from (Al-Ghazzi 2021; Yazbeck 2021); instead, such videos sublimate the work of local reporters as acts of individual sacrifice at the service of their people.

### 5.3 Non-Narrative Witnessing

Unlike the previous registers, the non-narrative form assembles and archives various forms of UGC material, including citizen reporting, NGO activist videos and military camera recordings, that together offer a data bank of annotated evidence on various fronts of the Syrian conflict - and in so doing departs from the spatio-temporal context of the news cycle. Recognising that "amateur videos have been pivotal to the way the conflict in Syria is understood",<sup>7</sup> as the *NYT* website puts it, the non-narrative character of this form of witnessing aims to not only make verification more visible to news publics in the global North but also to engage them more actively with its various forms of evidence.

Unique in this category is the *NYT* initiative, "Watching Syria's War", a ground-breaking project dedicated "to mak[ing] sense of the flood of videos emerging out of Syria", which launched in 2017 as a

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/search?query=watching+Syria%27s+war>.

large archive of UGC material put together in a separate, and rather obscure, section of the news platform. Arranged in a stack of singular items, each identically formatted with a drop-down menu of visual and verbal information plus social media links, the archive contains a wealth of UGC videos on the conflict throughout its duration. Two tropes define this non-narrative register of UGC testimony: i) multi-modal textuality; and ii) archival temporality, which situates UGC in the timeframe of the past as a long-term resource. While multi-modal textuality facilitates links to additional news reports, further analysis and annotation providing a more rounded view of the event, archival temporality relies on the distributed character of news verification, where various sources combine to establish the recorded event as credibly knowable - in line with other initiatives, such as Bellingcat or Amnesty's Decoder's Initiative (Gray 2019). While this register renders institutional protocols of verification more open and transparent, however, it also decentres the flesh witness as a suffering body struggling in scenes of extreme violence and represents such scenes as the aggregate sum of disparate, cross-corroborating accounts of the event.

## 6 The Neo-Coloniality of Western News

Legacy journalism in the global North, we argued, is captured within a fragile political economy of emotion and attention, defined by the proliferation of breaking, affective news, on the one hand, and by the risk of fake news and a techno-hermeneutic commitment to verification, on the other.<sup>8</sup> While the field of JS has so far engaged in important debates around the new truth conditions of platform journalism, if we wish to further account for citizen media as a techno-social practice of witnessing human suffering, we have also claimed, we need to push further the current conceptual and analytical boundaries of the field. Our argument did this in two ways.

Firstly, we thematised the tension between suspicion (could testimonials be false?) and urgency (are witnesses about to die?) that lies at the heart of UGC-driven news and, specifically, citizen's testimonials of suffering and death in contexts of war. In so doing, we also separated out the emotional force of such testimonials, that is the dramatic intensity of scenes of violence that triggers virality (and so platform profit), from its moral force, the responsibility to recog-

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<sup>8</sup> Even in high profile international cases of news verification failures, disbelieving locals is often part of the problem. For instance, in the case of the New York Times 'Caliphate' podcast scandal, it has now emerged that the Syrian journalist and translator, Karam Shoumali, who helped in the podcast, had expressed concerns about verification, which were dismissed (Smith 2020).

nise and potentially act on war atrocities. While the two are empirically inseparable, their analytical separation matters because it asserts the *irreducible specificity* of the moral value that is inherent in citizens' appeals for attention and action in contexts of risk to life. Shaped by the humanitarian discourse of twenty-first century geopolitics, this moral value moves beyond journalistic concerns for verification and poses anew the question of responsibility as western journalists re-narrate war from the perspective of those whose lives are most at risk. To this end, we introduced the concept of flesh witnessing, which draws attention to the corporeal dimension of citizen media as testimonial practice that is grounded upon and produced by vulnerable bodies. While all communication requires some form of mediation and so disembodiment, which inevitably renders flesh witnessing literally impossible in citizen media, our use of the term is meant as an invitation to interrogate the journalistic re-narrations of such media, asking how their exclusive focus on fact-checking impacts the moral potential of civilian media as lived experience – what we labelled as an analytical approach of narrative forensics.

Secondly, we developed a typology of three narrative registers of western war reporting, dominant in major news outlets of the global North (NYT, WP, The Guardian), that, depending on how they integrate the fact-checking process into their own story-telling, construe the flesh witnesses from the war in Syria in different ways: *meta-discursive*, *curated* and *non-narrative* registers. Each entails a distinct method of content authentication – making the truth status of citizen media the very topic of their story (curating UGC as personalised, digital story-telling, or archiving it in a hybrid data bank of separate incidents), yet all three introduce *ambivalence* into the bodies of their flesh witness. Bana, for instance, was re-narrated as both an innocent truth-teller and as a manipulative twitter user; Hadi and Mohammed were similarly portrayed as both ordinary citizen/reporters and as fearless heroes ready to die for their country; and the anonymous narrators of “Watching Syria’s War” were represented as diffused data nodes in a digital archive. As a consequence of this ambivalence, the moral force of these accounts is also marginalised in favour of citizen media’s affective potential for virality and ‘clickability’ in the global North: the heart-wrenching innocence of the child-witness ‘in the spirit of Anne Frank’, the adrenaline of battle scenes and on-screen death, the fascination with new data-driven war archives, including their unedited and distressing material.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Syrian activists also developed expertise on how to navigate and bypass the registers of Western reporting. The work of the Kafrabel Media Center, led by the late (assassinated) Raed Fares, comes to mind as it mixed local humanitarian appeals to the west with references to American pop culture and news agenda at a specific time; therefore increasing the chance of receiving global news coverage.

What these three registers highlight is that it is not only the verification process itself but also in the narration of verification as an integral part of western news story-telling that suppresses the moral force of non-western bodies under imminent threat. While verification is a core principle of western journalism that helps it counter digital manipulation, we have shown how its integration into news registers of flesh witnessing marginalises the voices of conflict at the very moment that it attempts to enhance their appeal. Whether through our three registers, or simply via the familiar phrases of ‘allegedly’, ‘this footage could not be verified’, or the false balance framing of ‘both sides’, western news systematically infuses any at-risk voice that speaks with either doubt or with lesser significance. These tropes consequently insert flesh witnessing within, what Farkas and Schou call, a “politics of falsehood” – a narrative politics of struggle over truth, where western news consistently manages to define truth within its own symbolic architectures of impartiality and, in so doing, “to partially dominate and silence other (subaltern) voices” (2018, 312).

The flesh witnesses of citizen media emerge from this western politics of falsehood as suspicious bodies that are not only epistemologically doubted, in the institutional sense of newsroom routines that verify who speaks. Importantly, they are suspicious also in the sense of bodies that are *ontologically untruthful*, in the postcolonial sense of western newsrooms attaching to Black and Brown bodies the quality of radical non-believability (Lorenzini, Tazzioli 2018). Indeed, the question of verification is firmly located within the historical power relations between global North and South as part of a longer-term politics of truth involving an all-knowing West and an unknowable and deceitful South: “in this colonial context”, as Fanon put it in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “there is no truthful behaviour [conduite]” (1963, 49). Despite, then, the drastic change catalysed by the use of mobile phones in terms of who speaks in the global mediascapes, nonetheless important geopolitical and institutional continuities remain in place that not only still define who is believed and who is not in platform journalism but that also continue to deprive Brown bodies of truth-telling capacity. The dislocation that we earlier established between the affective and moral urgency of news, performs profound political work in that, as in the past so now, it devalues and erases the lived experience of imminent death that lies at the heart of flesh witnesses’ about-to-die bodies – a kind of “truth that is political and moral before being juridical”, as Beneduce puts it, namely “the very possibility of their existence” (2011, 58).

Accordingly, even when geopolitics permits subaltern voices to circulate via western media, as has been the case when Syria was a big story, but much less so in Palestine or Yemen, news media still reinforce the generalised doubt about what their antagonists aim at instilling among global news publics, in the first place. In doing

so, they reproduce the colonial binary of the knowledgeable global North and the unreliable South in one more sense. They do not only come to ignore the precarious bodies of conflict, but also systematically misrecognise the life-threatening labour that racialised bodies routinely do to sustain conflict reporting as a profitable dimension of platform journalism often paying the price with their own lives. As long as flesh witnessing in the form of UGC dominates conflict reporting of the global South, it is important that western media rethink their epistemological architectures of impartiality. And that they do so in ways that not only accommodate updated versions of techno-hermeneutic verification, but also acknowledge the corporeal epistemologies of citizen media and embrace the moral urgency inscribed at the flesh of those who seek to amplify their and their own people's testimonies of suffering, be that in Gaza or in Aleppo.

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# Rhythm-Relay-Relation: Anticolonial Media Activisms in Athens

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**Abstract** This chapter maps out a set of anticolonial media poetics, politics, and aesthetics. It centres on a series of collaborative radio programmes produced in Athens, Greece, as part of ongoing work with an activist collective in the city. The chapter works with ideas of rhythm, relay, and relation – which serve both as methods and as guiding concepts – and narrates a form of citizen soundwork: sonic practices that experiment with geographical, political, and technological imaginations. This work in Athens is a convergence and continuation of media activism elsewhere, carrying collective methods of voicing and articulating belonging across migratory contexts. And it sounds out anticolonial media activism that feed back across histories and geographies of resistance and liberation. These media activism unmake colonial hierarchies of voice and knowledge; and make anticolonial publics, communicating across radical sonic cartographies and building political cultures that contest the colonialities of borders and citizenship regimes.

**Keywords** Rhythm. Relay. Relation. Anticolonialism. Activism. Radio. Citizenship.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Citizen Soundwork. – 3 Anticolonial Media Histories. – 4 Escape Routes from Representation Traps. – 5 Relational Media. – 6 Outro.

## 1 Introduction

“Hullo hullo... This is the BBC...” My colleague Wael puts on a plummy voice and a posh accent as we start recording. We are sitting in an improvised studio space – a couple of microphones in a back room of the building where we work – and setting down our conversations

for a radio show we are making for a forthcoming festival in Athens. The show is called *Al'Athinioun*, meaning 'Athenians' in Arabic, and it details new Athenian identities and publics that develop through movements of various kinds. Unscripted and unplanned, the intro takes the tone of postcolonial parody – a mocking mic check, at once calling attention to and playing with the colonial geographies of the medium, skewering the seriousness of its imperial centres and histories, speaking back, sounding out a break with systems of representation, of voice and silence, of racialised media operations.

"Hullo hullo I would like to be on the clear other side of the earth". A line from Aimé Césaire's poem *Le Cristal Automatique* (1983, 123), in which the "hullo hullo" repeats throughout – a resonant refrain signalling experimentation with forms of address, connection, and amplification (Hill Jr 2013). As a work of the Négritude movement, the poem's experiments sit within a larger project of denouncing imperialism and Eurocentrism, forging techniques of voicing an "anti-imperial politics and ethics of recognition" (Hill Jr 2013, 137), and demanding that the "counter-testimonies of history be heard" (138). Radio – or what Edwin Hill Jr (2013) calls "le poste colonial" – played a central role in these anti/colonial vocalities: at once a relay point of imperial structures of governance and subject formation, and a space for developing diasporic intimacies and solidarities and emergent modes of resistance.

"Hullo hullo". This chapter seeks to hear these experiments and forms of address together, mapping out a set of anticolonial media poetics and aesthetics. It centres on the work of an organisation I'm part of in Athens – the Syrian and Greek Youth Forum (SGYF) – where we have been producing our own citizen media since 2019. Here I seek to amplify this work and to theorise a little, positing this as a kind of anticolonial media activism, something that feeds back across histories and geographies of resistance and liberation, and that builds spaces for transformation as much as representation. I focus on radio, which has been key to our media work from the get-go. And I write here in the company of three radio shows we have produced: *Al'Athinioun* (2020), *The Movement Exists in Voice and Sound* (2021), and *Relational City* (2022) – as well as with our online Citizen Sound Archive, which at once serves as storehouse and sounding board for these media activisms.

Media activisms are a space of convergence and collectivity. In our case, these radio pieces produced in (and about) Athens contain ideas and practices from multiple places: Syrian scholars highlight the importance of citizen media during the Syrian revolution from 2011 onwards (Halasa, Omareen, Mahfoud 2014); while Athens has many of its own histories of resistance, voiced through underground radio and related media (e.g. Panourgia 2009). Our work builds on both of these movements, attempting to hold them together. And I'll detail here how these media activisms create anticolonial as much as post-



colonial publics – in the sense that colonialities of borders and racialised regimes of citizenship are not confined to the past but continue into the present (e.g. Hall 1995; Mayblin, Turner 2021). Anticolonialism is an unfinished and ongoing project.<sup>1</sup> Colonial logics also continue to inform who has the right to narrate: the city, the nation, the European continent (cf. Said 1984). Anticolonial media finds ways out of representation traps – those systems of narration that strip people of agency and creativity, which map onto colonial hierarchies of voice and knowledge, and are shot through representations of migration and displacement.

The chapter seeks and speaks other imaginations and mediations. It works with ideas of rhythm, relay, and relation – which serve both as methods and as guiding concepts. Together these ideas describe the world-wide movements and entanglements of cultures and peoples (Shih 2018); the sonic cartographies that emerge as a result (Ochoa Gautier 2019); the ways that Europe has long contained multiple elsewheres; and the ways that media activisms generate transformative transmissions and anti-border broadcasts. I turn, first, to the question of citizen soundwork, detailing our radio projects in Athens. Second, the chapter places these movements into history, drawing the connections between migration, media, and anticolonial activisms that have long been circulating around the Mediterranean and beyond. I then focus, third, on practices of asserting a political voice that speaks both individually and collectively and across languages. And fourth, I develop ideas of relational media, showing how this citizen media pulls together movements and methods that remake publics and urban space.

These ideas align with anticolonial thought in refusing the notion of Europe as a discrete entity in global history (Césaire [1955] 2000) and drawing attention to the intimacies that exist across continents, empires, and archives (Lowe 2015). The result is a citizen media that calls out the forgetfulness of European history and the racisms of citizenship regimes. A media that is a method of social transformation, imagining things otherwise. A media that forms counterpublics, constructing audiences that collapse binaries of migrant and citizen, of refugee and European. A media that sings long histories of movement, encounter, exchange. Against the border spectacle of ‘refugee crisis’ that Europe continually produces, this chapter tells of creative activisms, stories built out of anticolonial energy, and publics that are decentred and multiple.

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**1** I use ‘anticolonial’ rather than ‘decolonial’ here, following Priyamvada Gopal (2021), who writes of anticolonialism as the necessary stage between colonialism and decolonisation. The media activisms narrated in this chapter are best described as anticolonial – part of the ongoing work of anticolonialism that exists in social movements but is often missed in academic discussions of decolonisation.

## 2 Citizen Soundwork

Based in Athens, Greece, since 2018, SGYF is an international activist movement working to build platforms of citizenship. Together we run the Active Citizens Sound Archive – a space for amplifying this citizenship work, for community mobilising, and collective research and knowledge production. Media was on the agenda from our first meeting, towards the end of 2018. Alongside our advocacy work for minoritised and precarious populations in the city, our focus on employment rights and opportunities for people of refugee background, our work with culture and performance as a means of communicating with and becoming part of Athenian publics – as a team we decided early that producing media would be an important part of our work.<sup>2</sup>

We began doing workshops on recording the city and its citizenships, using sound as a heuristic and a catalyst for narration (cf. Anand 2017; Gilroy 1993), and sharing skills of editing and mixing so that the team has the ability – the power – to produce its own media. This in turn stemmed from an activist lesson I learned early from my Syrian colleagues, who tell me that life as they experience it is very different from life as it is reported by the media; who tell me that we have a responsibility to record what is happening in Athens, and to spread word of the situation from within. Towards the end of 2019, a year after founding the organisation and several months after starting our recording workshop, we set up our Citizen Sound Archive – intended as a space for creation and documentation, a resource for the city, a platform for communication with movements elsewhere.

In many ways, this project maps onto definitions of citizen media sketched by Mona Baker and Bolette Blaagaard, who write of the “vital political, social and ethical issues relating to conceptions of citizenship and state boundaries, the construction of publics and social imaginaries, processes of co-optation and reverse co-optation, power and resistance, the ethics of witnessing and solidarity, and novel responses to the democratic deficit” (2016, 19) that are all part of this work. In the Sound Archive, our recordings sit within a much bigger project of remaking citizenship – away from statist renditions of belonging, defined by borders and papers and other technologies of exclusion, with territories indexed to ethnicities, languages and religions; and towards citizenships understood as a creative and collective set of methods and practices, something plural and migratory, that become spaces of coalition, foregrounding struggles that are shared and held in common.

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<sup>2</sup> I was lucky enough to be invited to be a member of the team after having spent the previous two years (2017-18) working with its co-founders in other capacities.

All of which is particularly pointed for people who revolted against dictatorship in Syria and have since found themselves at the sharp end of the colonialities of borders and citizenship regimes in Greece and Europe. Citizenship itself is a colonial project and product, a border, a bordering (Dyrness, Sepúlveda III 2020; Western, forthcoming). Our team is less concerned with questions of integration and inclusion into existing regimes of citizenship (though of course the material and social benefits of this are very real), and more interested in questions of social transformation and liberation from racialised systems of unfreedom that inform all aspects of life and livingness. Our media work has these politics built in, containing a set of methods, practices and narratives which inform the production process as much as the content (Baker, Blaagaard 2016, 12). Both citizenship and citizen media, from these perspectives, are processes more than they are fixed entities or outcomes.

On another level, then, these production practices resonate with what Anthony Reed terms *soundwork*. Thinking from Black studies and with Black sound, Reed details soundwork as a kind of political and aesthetic labour that “does not simply express an evolving consciousness and orientation toward freedom; it does not reflect the world in which it resonates, but meaningfully changes it” (Reed 2021, 4). The contexts are different – and definitely I do not wish to conflate forms of oppression that have specific histories, geographies, and colonialities – but I learn from Reed’s soundwork and seek here to think it together with our media activism in Athens, transposing both into an anticolonial sound studies that foregrounds the creative liberation practices of marginalised communities.

From early 2020 we were making radio, using our archival recordings as the basis for programmes and episodes. Following a few failed attempts to work with large national broadcasters from various European countries – who insisted on individual stories of suffering and success, rather than our collective work of imagining – we found a home at an Athens-based station, Movement Radio. This station is sponsored by one of the big cultural centres in the city, so any claims on this being underground culture would be disingenuous. But between the station and our organisation there exists a set of shared focuses on Mediterranean circulations and futures, which has given us a platform to create and develop our citizen soundwork. And it is through this platform that we’ve produced a series of pieces that seek to remap and remake sonic imaginations of the city, the sea, and Europe’s relations with its neighbouring continents.

*Al’Athinioun* speaks of Athenian identities that develop through movements – both movements across borders and social and political movements – and the kinds of publics that emerge as a result. The piece narrates a series of actions organised and performed by the team, and the underlying goals of finding and claiming kinds of so-

cial and cultural citizenship in a situation where many rights and dignities are denied. *The Movement Exists in Voice and Sound* is about revolutionary rhythms, anticolonial echoes, and political reverberations between and beyond Athens and Damascus. It centres on voice and sound as vehicles of uprising, of carrying the work of revolution across time and space, of city making, and of citizenship. *Relational City* hears an Athens built on relation and commonality: a place that contains other places; movements that contain other movements; citizenships that contain other citizenships. The programme sounds out a city that holds multiple cities inside it, based both on old entanglements of cultures and people, and on newer ideas and creativities.

These programmes constitute a form of media activism in which media is understood and used as an end in itself - not just as an amplifier of agendas (Dunbar-Hester 2014, vxiii). As citizen soundwork, these pieces utilise the contours and possibilities of the medium. They take sound seriously as a material of social change, as a mode of collectivity and an articulation of belonging, as something that is always moving, that can help us rethink citizenships through movement. And they work with techniques of radio broadcast - of rhythm, relay, and relation - that have developed through the medium's histories, and through anticolonial reappropriations of its technologies (Hill Jr 2013). With the remaining sections of this chapter, I will place our citizen soundwork into histories and geographies of insurgent media, collective poetics, and sonic counterpublics. This involves turning next to history, drawing the connections between migration, media, and anticolonial activism that have been circulating for centuries.

### 3 Anticolonial Media Histories

Media has long been a vector of modernity (Anand 2017, 14), which means it has also long been a vector of empire. Radio, in particular, became a colonial tool through the twentieth century, representing and transmitting colonial power. Bessire and Fisher (2012, 7) write of radio as a "portable missionary" - spreading the imperial word and imparting its worldviews. Dionne Brand, writing of her childhood in Trinidad, gives an account of this, depicting how "through the BBC broadcasts we were inhabited by British consciousness" (2001, 16-17). More generally, radio has accompanied and been a tool of international development and humanitarian intervention in various global contexts, continually rearticulating colonial dynamics (Hartley 2000; Tomiak 2018). Radio is a colonial relay point. Edwin Hill Jr, writing of French imperialism but in ways that apply across empires, posits radio as a "literal and conceptual site where a range of ideas about imperialism" and "diasporic relations were debated, transferred, and translated" (2013, 123).

Just as radio served as a colonial relay, it was also the opposite: an anticolonial agent, speaking counter-testimony to dominant histories (137). These politics were not inherent to the medium itself, which was (and is) rather a set of relations and “conditions of possibility for colonially or anticolonially speaking and hearing the world” (124). In this section I will sketch some anticolonial media histories (not a complete history!) which continue to resound into the present, and inform the formations of anticolonial publics in contemporary Europe. At the centre of these histories are experiments with geographical, political, and technological imaginations, all of which continue to reverberate.

Experimentation is a necessary part of the decolonial project. If we listen to anticolonial histories, we find experiments with imagination and solidarity. These experiments are not just political but cultural and aesthetic. To move first to the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Spirit of Bandung that animated and followed it, we find a focus on culture as much as politics. Thinking again with Césaire, Bandung was a “cultural event of the first order”: a “peaceful uprising of peoples hungry not only for justice and dignity but also for what colonisation had taken away of the greatest importance: culture” ([1956] 2010, 131). This involved reforging cultural connections and intimacies severed by colonisation, but it also involved developing new forms of cultural expression through experimental idioms. Anna Agathangelou calls this Bandung’s revolutionary poetics: “a poetics of solidarity, using verbs, tropes, and strophes to challenge and transform the consciousness of peoples” (2016, 102), inspiring grammars and creative possibilities, and fostering a global aesthetic imaginary and movement (102-3).

This imaginary also generated media techniques. The Spirit of Bandung developed alongside and through the expansion of short-wave radio, transmitting and relaying anticolonial movements at levels of both politics and poetics. Radio stations broadcast their support for independence and liberation movements, and broadcast a “new poetics of transnational and diasporic relating” (Hill Jr 2013, 124). In Hill Jr’s words, “radio functioned as a critical relay point for ne-gritude’s critiques of colonial truth and racial ideology” (2013, 124). And it also sounded out new vernaculars – the rhymes and rhythms of what Khadija El Alaoui (2016) calls “Street Bandung”, which disseminated and drove forward anticolonial aspirations. These rhymes and rhythms ring out through radiophonic relay. Anticolonial appropriations of radio constitute participatory relays of knowledge, central to anticolonial theory and praxis. And relay, to borrow a vocabulary from Édouard Glissant (1997), is a technique of relation.

“On every side the idea is being relayed. When you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form” (Glissant 1997, 45). Sound me-

dia is a tool of simultaneity, connecting and generating publics that collapse geographical distances. These intimacies predate radio, of course, but they take on new aesthetics and political possibilities in broadcast circulation. Sound scholars narrate how radio and recorded musics became a soundtrack to decolonisation. Social diasporas, produced through the forced movements of people over centuries of empire, are also sonic diasporas, generating both a vernacular avant-garde (Reed 2021) and a peripheral modernity (Denning 2015). Sound bounces around diasporic public spheres through sonic infrastructures and intimacies (Goffe 2020a), unmapping colonial geographies of centres and peripheries (Goffe 2020b).

Circulation, reverberation. Tuning this back into the geographies of this chapter, these relays and relations, rhythms and reverberations have long histories in Mediterranean contexts. Anticolonial media circulates through Mediterranean feedback loops - through periodicals, pamphlets, plays, poetry, performance, cinema, radio, and records - turning the sea into a space of contestation. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi (2013), charting these contestatory popular cultures in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, details how new publics (and notions of the public) emerged in Eastern Mediterranean cities. These publics are rooted in what Khuri-Makdisi terms a “popular anti-imperialism” (2013, 144), as people thought, created, and organised against both direct and indirect forms of imperialism. Through these practices, the Eastern Mediterranean became a global region and stimulated a global radicalism.

Media was again central to these connections and contestations, relaying anticolonial poetics and politics across global diasporas - including across a Syrian diaspora that straddled North Africa, South-west Asia, South America, and Europe. And compellingly, Khuri-Makdisi writes of how these movements and mediations allowed people to “connect and create imagining communities and ties of solidarity across lands and seas” (2013, 32). The term “imagining communities” is so helpful here precisely because it thinks across and against, rather than within and with national borders. It thus does the opposite work of Benedict Anderson’s much better-known (1991) term “imagined communities” - those implicitly homogenous groups that form the populace of the nation-state, conceived and performed through print media or broadcast sound (Western 2018). Imagining communities make anticolonial publics, communicating through rhythm, relay, and relation across transnational radical trajectories, building political cultures that do not map onto national(ist) and Eurocentric histories. These media geographies decentre and destabilise ideas of European publics. And they distort representations of migration, and colonial hierarchies of voice embedded within them.

## 4 Escape Routes from Representation Traps

In 1951, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) – what is now the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR – released a set of 78rpm discs called *The Refugees Sing*, featuring recordings made in refugee camps across Europe after World War 2. In the liner notes, the IRO Director General, Donald Kingsley, made a claim for the voices contained therein as heralding a world in the making. “These are the voices of the refugees themselves”, he writes, “recorded in the camps where they lived suspended between two worlds. It is more than music. It is the voice of an age – the age of the refugee” (IRO 1951). I start this section here to illustrate that the trope of refugee voices – and the kinds of claims made about them – is not new. It is, instead, something recursive and repeating, which continues to animate many representations of displacement: predicated on ideas of transparency and agency, but equally reproducing ideas of refugee-ness as separate from the rest of humanity (Malkki 1996), and with a set of narratives and narrative politics built in.

We can think of these as representation traps. State work, humanitarianism, mainstream media, and much scholarship rests upon and recycles a set of narratives that allow people of refugee background to speak only through certain frames: serving up reductive prototypes of flight and suffering; or centring ‘refugee stories’ of trauma and overcoming. Recent literatures challenge notions that these storytelling practices are somehow inherently useful – especially when they speak only in tragic tropes, and silence people as critical and active(ist) subjects.<sup>3</sup> There are two tasks here. The first is to recognise the colonialities built into these systems of representation. The second is to find ways out of them, hearing how people use media activism to chart escape routes from these representation traps. Both tasks require pushing against frames of ‘refugee voices’: representational practices built on conceits of ‘giving voice’, recycling humanitarian models that encourage sympathy instead of solidarity, aid instead of activism.

The colonialities in question centre on what Lilie Chouliaraki (2016) calls “hierarchies of voice”. In representation traps, and in media geographies of crisis, particular groups of people are confined to the role of witness – considered unable to theorise on events and situations, which is then left to supposed expert authorities. These hierarchies of voice are also hierarchies of knowledge. And this work of classification and organising people and knowledges into categories was (and continues to be) central to the colonial project (Lowe 2015). Displacements and migrations are bound up with colonial pasts and

<sup>3</sup> Cabot 2016; 2019; Nayel 2013; Tamas 2019; Vera Espinoza 2019; Western 2020a.

ongoing colonialities, as are the institutional forms of protection and knowledge production that dominate the systems of representation under discussion here. As Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner (2021) write, both UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) emerged out of European colonialism: founded in response to particular historical moments to support European refugees, only later expanding their geographical scope, but arguably not changing their political priorities.

The kinds of knowledge valued and produced by news organisations (Trilling 2019) and by universities and academic disciplines (McKittrick 2021) map onto these colonial geographies and hierarchies. And the task of building escape routes involves not just unlearning hierarchies of voice and knowledge, but building relational spaces that cut across (and subvert) these sectors. As Katherine McKittrick puts it, detailing how anticolonial studies and Black studies does this kind of work:

Part of our intellectual task is to work out how different kinds and types of voices *relate to each other* and open up unexpected and surprising ways to think about liberation, knowledge, history, race, gender, narrative, and blackness. (2021, 50)

This is coalition work – the work of voicing, thinking, and listening in collective formations, unbound by colonial structures of expertise and erasure. And in so doing, developing and asserting forms of political voice that refuse the roles and prototypes outlined above.

Refusal and escape routes take on an anticolonial politics. They produce a kind of feedback – introducing disruption and dissonance into regimes of who speaks, who is silenced, and on whose terms communication takes place. We bring this politics to our work in Athens. At times explicitly so, as when we ran a workshop on “Sounding an Anticolonial Athens” with friends and like-minded organisations in the city in 2021: listening and sounding against cultural borders that are constantly drawn to define and delineate notions of the public, both in urban space and in the city at large. Rather than reproducing national(ist) renditions of the city, or European ideal visions in which Athens becomes a sign and symbol of European civilisation, we sought instead to place Athens on the Mediterranean, rethinking its geographies in relation with other Mediterranean cities, through long histories of connections with other places across and around the sea, and through rhythms of diversity at street level.

And at times this is more implicit, as in our radio work. Here we combine knowledges and voices to narrate the city as we see and hear it. This means not just claiming the right to the city, but the right to write the city. Which is close to what Edward Said (1984) called the permission to narrate – except in this case people are not



asking for permission, but are claiming the right to narrate as one of many rights to be at once fought for and asserted. An accumulation of knowledges; a set of collective methods. Importantly (and this is another anticolonial point), these methods do not begin and end in Europe, but carry across relational geographies. Citizen media played a vital role in revolution in Syria from 2011 onwards. In Omar Alasad's words, "the real story of the Syrian revolution began the moment the country's citizens became citizen-journalists" (2014, 113). And this work of making media from behind the "media curtain" (cooke 2017, 43) held steady through a set of shared practices of narrating, archiving, and amplifying revolution.

This citizen media work centred on collective memory-making and building a potential archive – an archive both of revolutionary potential and holding the possibility of future commemoration (cooke, 2017, 7). The potential archive combined a new audiovisual language with accounts of intimate defiance and everyday contestation (Elias, Omareen 2014, 258). Again this involved soundwork. Dozens of radio stations opened during the uprising to replace official broadcasting – set up both by Syrians living abroad and in Syria itself (Alasad 2014, 115; cooke 2017, 113) – and women installed loudspeakers on the rooftops of buildings and in parks, to broadcast revolutionary songs during demonstrations (Sahloul 2014). And again this involved remaking citizenship as something grounded in culture and creativity, rather than something defined, conferred and denied by the state; in this case an authoritarian regime (Yassin-Kassab, Al-Shami 2018).

These are mobile practices. Revolutionary soundwork was the subject of our radio show, *The Movement Exists in Voice and Sound*, in which my colleague Kareem narrates the vocalities of uprising and the ways that sound stimulates and carries into movements across radical trajectories around the Mediterranean and beyond. Revolutionary techniques and aesthetics – including building insurgent media infrastructures (Reed 2021, 5) – carry across migratory contexts, feeding into assertions of refugee rights and social citizenships in Europe. Yet these migratory activisms are almost completely missing from accounts of migration that focus only on the deathscapes of the Mediterranean and crisis at the borders (Western 2020b). Such practices are enrolled in slower processes of building anticolonial publics in Europe – forms of emergence rather than emergency – joining with longer histories and rhythms of migratory and diasporic resistance and solidarity (e.g. Emejulu, Sobande 2019). And they also lock into global patterns of the refusal of hierarchies of voice and colonial projects of representation.

Escaping representation traps involves (and I close this section with the wonderful work of Sujatha Fernandes) building "autonomous collective spaces of resistance that can forge new representations" (2017, 162), and finding modes of narration that seek "to transform

rather than reproduce global hierarchies and structures of power through movements for social change” (4). Anticolonial publics and media activisms show how this works and what it sounds like, moving in rhythm on a planetary scale. These are rhythms of community and commonality, of movement and migration, of citizenship and city making, of archiving and imagining. And these rhythms make relational geographies and relational media, which is where I turn for this chapter’s final section.

## 5 Relational Media

“Athens now, I believe it’s holding other cities. We are in Athens and we are free to express ourselves and express our city, to bring our city’s feeling and our city’s struggle. Athens is giving us this space” (SGYF 2022). I start this final section with some lines from my colleague Kareem in our programme *Relational City*. This idea – and the programme in general – resonate with the themes of this chapter: listening and speaking in relation, narrating the city, and thinking across anticolonial histories and geographies of contestation. But here I want to focus in on the work of relation, and the ways that it produces relational media. Citizen media is ultimately a set of relations: a collective inscription (Hill Jr 2013, 126), a community building practice (Baker, Blaagaard 2016, 14). This last section thinks this through activist knowledge, circular movements, and sonic cartographies.

At the time of writing, our organisation is in the process of expanding our media work – setting up a Citizen Media Lab in Athens to continue our soundwork and also to develop new directions for our media activisms. This involves renting a physical space in the city, intended to be a gathering place as well as a production site. In a proposal we wrote to send to prospective funders and to related organisations in the city, we outlined our goals and plans for the space:

The Lab will not only be a site of media production in the conventional sense, but a place of advocacy and community mobilising, of research and learning. We will run study groups on citizenship, history, and various social and political issues. We will connect with social movements around the world. We will host discussions as well as producing media across and through multiple languages. We will develop a community of activist writers and producers. (Personal document, on file)

This plan points in two directions. On one level, it centres ideas of activist knowledge. This means taking seriously the roles of knowledge and research in social movements and citizen media, and recognising the important of spaces of combining knowledge and building ca-

capacity, so that these movements might circulate and reverberate and gain traction elsewhere (Choudry 2015). We take inspiration from the work of movements worldwide, and the work of establishing centres of collective learning and resistance. We think with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who writes of the “embodied political experimentation” which is at the heart of many movements – conveying how people are simultaneously looking for and creating a guide to action, “to theorise or map or plan their way out of the margins” (2008, 50). In her work in Lisbon, Gilmore describes spaces of study and struggle as “pop-up universities” (2020, 177). We run with this idea in Athens, and follow this logic to imagine our space as one of pop-up media and media theory – pulling both down from elite spaces and repositioning them as things that are produced by everyone.

Again this is an anticolonial move. It challenges the tendency to think of theory as something which is generated in universities, and the corollary tendency to think of theory as coming from the global north, to then be applied everywhere else – suggesting that European knowledge is universal, and other knowledge can only be hyper-local (Choudry, Kapoor 2010). Instead we think of knowledge, media, and theory as existing in motion and in relation, travelling and converging in local contexts. As we relay in *Relational City*, Athens now contains Damascus and Aleppo, contains Alexandria, contains Gaza, contains cities from all around and beyond the Eastern Mediterranean. This creates relational ways of being and belonging, with commonalities rooted in shared experience and knowledge, all of which are channelled into our media work.

On a second level, this work fits into a circle of movements in the city. We find ourselves in relation and conversation with other grassroots organisations, all of whom produce citizen media in different ways, and all of whom work to re-imagine questions of urban citizenship in Athens. To give a couple of examples, friends at Victoria Square Project are running a project titled “Who is the Contemporary Athenian?”, seeking to think Athenian society “beyond labels like ‘immigrant’, refugee, first or second generation, Greek etc, but under the common ground of the neighbours and co-citizens” (Victoria Square Project 2020). And friends at ANASA Cultural Centre of African Arts and Culture have been working since 2010 towards the “empowerment and inclusion, through art and culture, of young people of African origin who were either born in Greece or came as migrants or refugees” (ANASA 2022).

These movements often come together at events in the city, and in 2022 we collectively broadcast an online discussion of Athenian citizenships, produced by the Onassis Cultural Centre in collaboration with SGYF (Onassis Stegi 2022) [fig. 1]. This circle of movements became a circular conversation, a relational citizen media, at once focused on the specificities of the city, yet with a planetary imagina-

tion – speaking with and to movements around the world. To borrow an idea from the philosopher Kostas Axelos, relational citizen media conveys a kind of planetary thought (1964), and these cross-movement gatherings manifest as “roundtables of eternal return” (Deleuze 2004, 157) – rhythms and relays and relations that loop across trajectories in space-time on a global scale.



**Figure 1** Still from the online discussion “8 Athenians Discuss: What Does it Mean to be an Active Citizen Today?”, 2022. Onassis Stegi, Athens. © Pavlos Fysakis for Onassis Stegi

To plug this back into our radio work, my last point is that anticolonial soundwork and relational media make new sonic cartographies (Ochoa Gautier 2019). Publics in Europe have always existed in, and have been produced by, intimate relations with people and politics elsewhere (Lowe 2015). These anti/colonial relations play out through sonic circulations (Reed 2021, 12), and we cannot position Europe as ever having been a self-contained space (cf. Césaire [1955] 2000). Yet as well as connecting pasts and presents (and not placing them in linear formation), it is important to keep listening for the specific relations that make up places and publics in Europe today. Media is key to understanding this “cartography of desires, narratives, and competing claims to legitimacy” (Reed 2021, 19). And sounds, through their constant movements and crossings, refigure the borders of citizenship (Chávez 2017, 5).

## 6      **Outro**

“I hope one day we could just really see the whole world as cities and neighbourhoods without actual borders between countries. And you could see it all smoothly flowing with each other” (SGYF 2022). The last words are Wael’s, again from our programme *Relational City*. Spoken into our microphone as we walked together around the neighbourhoods of Athens, these ideas speak an everyday politics that tie together the main themes of this chapter: escaping representation traps that frame how voice is produced and received; picking up anticolonial media histories that push against Eurocolonial bordering practices; thinking in relation as cities exist within other cities, all flowing together; and constituting a kind of citizen soundwork that expresses these politics and poetics. This chapter has sought to sound out anticolonial media activisms in Athens, stretching anticolonialisms across geographies and histories. I’ve narrated these activisms through rhythm, relay, and relation – all of which continue to transform media, publics, and culture.

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# Podcasting Race: Participatory Media Activism in Postcolonial Italy

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**Abstract** In the past few years, the increasing production of podcasts on issues of race and structural racism has been part of a wider panorama of digital activism that has promoted global antiracist networks and fostered an intersectional debate on race and gender oppression, migrations and citizenship, generally inadequately discussed by Italian mainstream media. After analysing the specificities of the podcast as citizen media and as tools for global mobilisation, the article examines three podcasts produced by Italian Black women and women of Color as case studies (*Sulla razza*, *Black Coffee* and *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman*).

**Keywords** Podcasts. Structural racism. Digital activism. Intersectionality. Black Italian women intellectuals.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Podcasting: An Intimate Practice to Build Political and Social Commitment. – 3 Antiracist Voices: Podcasts and the Shaping of a Postcolonial Digital Archive. – 3.1 *Sulla razza* (About Race). – 3.2 *Black Coffee*. – 3.3 *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman*. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

In the past two years, digital platforms have acquired an increasingly central role in individual and collective lives, also as a consequence of the social isolation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrently, the spreading of the Black Lives Matter protests following the assassination of George Floyd in May 2020 saw a proliferation of digital initiatives and debates worldwide, which have enabled the creation of global connections among marginalised social groups.<sup>1</sup> If social media constitute the digital infrastructures through which the affective and emotional engagement of digitised audiences is produced (Papacharissi 2015, 9), such production has recently become highly visible in Italy, where the BLM protests have promoted a digital transnational response to and collective conversation on issues of race, historical and structural racism, contemporary processes of racialisation as a colonial legacy and the acquisition of Italian citizenship for ‘second generations’.<sup>2</sup> Black Italian intellectuals, artists, activists and activists have employed different social media to elaborate personal narratives starting from their own experiences as racialised people, to reflect on such experiences, to draw transnational trajectories, and to connect with the global BLM movement (Uyangoda 2020). In this contexts, practices of cultural media activism such as podcasts have functioned both as a tool for global mobilisation and a site for the production of race studies.

Beginning with the assumption that “with the increased dominance of social media, the role of public intellectuals has shifted from that of highly individualized and solitary iconic figures to that of collective, diffused and multi-sited actors” (Ponzanesi 2021, 434), in this chapter we argue that podcasting in contemporary Italy has been deployed as a “citizen medium” operating in a “highly interdisciplinary territory of

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Although the authors conceived and developed this article jointly, Caterina Romeo wrote the introduction and the second section titled “Podcasting: An Intimate Practice to Build Political and Social Commitment”, while Giulia Fabbri wrote the third section titled “Antiracist Voices: Podcasts and the Shaping of a Postcolonial Digital Archive” and the conclusions.

We, the authors, consider our writing about race and processes of racialisation in this article to be one way to expose racism, create awareness, contribute to the critical debate on these issues, and give the deserved attention to the work of Black intellectuals, artists and activists in Italy who are reshaping Italian culture. As ‘white’ women, we acknowledge that being the subject of racism is not part of our everyday lived experience - although being the subject of sexism is - and therefore we do not claim to be speaking as part of the racialised community but rather as active and empathetic allies of racialised communities in the fight against racism.

**1** Hu 2020; Wirtschafter 2021; Auxier 2020; Moody-Ramirez, Tait, Bland 2021; Vanoni 2021.

**2** Hawthorne, Pesarini 2020; Kan, Ripanti, Obasuyi 2020; Pesarini 2020; Younge 2020.

scholarly enquiry and practice, one where the boundaries between the university and the street, between different disciplines, and between physical and virtual spaces are all critically examined, questioned and renegotiated” (Baker, Blaagaard 2017, 2). We briefly introduce how podcasting has rapidly become a global cultural phenomenon (Chadha, Avila, Gil de Zúñiga 2012; Samuel-Azran, Laor, Tal 2019) and highlight some of the specificities of podcasting that make this medium different from radio broadcasting – flexibility, intentionality, commitment, sense of intimacy, affective relationship between speakers and listenership, asynchronous listening, potentiality in promoting activism (Berry 2016; Espada 2018; Lundström, Lundström 2021). We then scrutinise the potential role of podcasts as citizen media in making human rights and social matters relevant, “attractive and ‘newsworthy’” (Carlton 2018, 355) and specifically analyse the significance of podcasting in the production of race studies in general and of feminist race studies in particular. In the second section of this chapter, we then examine how in the past decade contemporary postcolonial Italy – where racism is seldom perceived in its structural aspects and connected to Italian colonial history and where national culture is in urgent need of decolonisation – has seen a production of podcasts by racialised subjects who utilise these media to author their own stories, and thus regain authority over their own lives, but also to create awareness and connections in the Black Italian and transnational community and to make race issues visible and debatable. They thus assume the role of “counterpublic intellectuals” as their “actions are carried out in alternative and marginal (counter) publics” (Habed, Ponzanesi 2018, xxxvi) and contribute to the decolonisation of Italian and European culture. In Italy, where citizenship is still attributed mainly according to a law based on the biological principle of *ius sanguinis* and where a new law based on the principles of *ius soli* and *ius culturae* (now *ius scholae*) has yet to be approved, Black podcasters are articulating counternarratives that denounce processes of racialisation as a colonial legacy and highlight everyday practices of race and gender oppression against migrants and subsequent generations. We present here three case studies of podcasts produced (mainly) by racialised Italian women writers, intellectuals, bloggers, journalists and activists in Italy centered on processes of racialisation and on the intersection of race and gender in contemporary Italy: *Sulla razza* (conducted by Nathasha Fernando, Nadeesha Uyangoda, and Maria Catena Mancuso and aired in 2021); *Black Coffee* (directed by Ariam Tekle and Emmanuelle Maréchal, launched in 2020 and still on air); and *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman* (conducted by Benedicta Djumpah, started in 2020 and still on air).<sup>3</sup>

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**3** At the time we selected the case studies and started elaborating the article, the podcasts included in the present analysis were the only ones conceived and conducted by

## 2 **Podcasting: An Intimate Practice to Build Political and Social Commitment**

In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2004, journalist and blogger Ben Hammersley commented on the upcoming revolution in the field of audible media, stating that “MP3 players, like Apple’s iPod, in many pockets, audio production software cheap or free, and web-logging an established part of the internet” constituted “all the ingredients [...] for a new boom in amateur radio” (2004). He highlighted some of the characteristics that made this medium different from radio broadcasting, suggested a few made-up names for it (“But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?”), and one of them – podcast – was adopted consistently and has been in use ever since. Nowadays scholars unanimously consider podcasting as a different kind of medium from radio broadcasting (Berry 2006; 2016a; 2016b; Menduni 2007; Bonini 2015), the main difference consisting in the great freedom and flexibility podcasting affords both producers and consumers alike. As ex-*New York Times* and National Public Radio journalist Christopher Lydon stated at the very beginning of this cultural phenomenon already in 2004 while comparing podcasting to more ‘traditional’ journalism, such flexibility was “something that newspapers can only dream about... they all have an institutional envy (of this)” (quoted in Hammersley 2004). Podcasting necessitates a rather minimal equipment (mainly a computer, a microphone, and an internet connection) and, therefore, its production does not require a specific location (as radio broadcasting does). As for consumers, the digital files containing audio (and video) can be downloaded onto personal computers and portable media players (mainly iPods in the past and iPhones in the present) and then listened to asynchronously, thus eliminating spatial and temporal constraints (Hammersley 2004; Haygood 2007; Chada, Avila, Gil de Zúñiga 2012).

For podcast listenership, flexibility is also accompanied by a sense of ‘hyperintimacy’ (“Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting [headphones], utilizing an intimate form of communication [human speech]” and they are “frequently recorded in a podcaster’s own domestic space”) (Berry 2016a, 666), which, in turn, combines with intentionality and an active commitment (“Unlike radio listeners, who may encounter programmes by chance and use them as sonic wallpaper, the podcast listener actively searches for content and puts

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Italian Black women and women of Color. They are of particular importance since they paved the way for the production of podcasts focused on issues of race and racism by racialised Italian women. Other podcasts on race and processes of racialisation have subsequently aired, including Sabrina Efonayi’s *Storia del mio nome* (Story of My Name).

time aside to listen”) (Berry 2016a, 666).<sup>4</sup> The combination of intimacy with commitment in this form of aural communication based on the voice of the presenter-researcher is more likely to create an affective engagement in the listenership (Kincaid, Emard, Senanayake 2020), and to help people make sense of their personal experiences through the experiences of others. Therefore, even when the stories narrated are personal and the process of listening produces a sense of intimacy, podcasting still retains a highly social potential, as it encourages identification with other members of the listenership and promotes activities that lead to community building (Lundström, Lundström 2021): “By listening to detailed personal experiences of ‘others’, listeners become connected to the people whose stories they share” (Lindgren 2016, 27).

What was considered really revolutionary in the mediascape of the early 2000s was the strong social and political impact this medium could potentially produce, as “the pioneers threatened to disrupt the top-down media ecosystem” and to enact a “democratization of media production tools” (Berry 2016, 661). Although the very notion of democratisation must be relativised and questioned, as vast sections of the world population are excluded from the internet and thus left outside of digital global communication, internet-based citizen media have in fact facilitated the access of marginalised subjects generally absent from the traditional media world and allowed these new figures of ‘(counter)public intellectuals’ to emerge, including social media activists, artists and activists committed to promote social change, justice and equality in contemporary postcolonial societies. In their digital activity not only does “the street migrate [...] to the living room” (Young 2012, 32), thus blurring the boundaries between public and private, political and personal, but such blurring acquires a global dimension as it produces transnational digital networks that reinforce offline political action.

Podcasting is considered a relatively easy medium to access for communities historically underrepresented in mainstream media who want to tell their own stories in their own voices, create social awareness, be it in the field of disabled, queer, trans, Black, Indigenous environmental activists and activists of Colour (Mulki, Ormsby 2021); ‘everyday human rights’ activists in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Carlton 2018); African American intellectuals and activists who promote racial politics in the USA (Fiorini 2015), just to mention a few meaningful examples. In the past ten years, podcasting has been

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<sup>4</sup> Berry also mentions the existence of other differences, such as podcast and audio on demand, professional and amateur producers, distribution via free hosting sites and via private networks (2016a, 66). These differences are not examined here as they are not significant for the specific analysis we develop in this article.

deployed, alongside other digital media, to build a constructive dialogue about race, to denounce structural racism, to reveal the presence of processes of racialisation and also to underline how Black people have given their remarkable contribution in different societies around the world. In the podcast *About Race*, for instance, host and world-famous author of the best-selling *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017) Reni Eddo-Lodge discusses race with her guests through such diverse issues as institutional racism in British politics, the connection of contemporary racism with colonial history, the inclusion of new words indicating racial injustice into the Oxford English Dictionary – such as ‘woke’ – and the change in the ways race is discussed in the media. Eddo-Lodge also highlights the pervasiveness of racism in British culture, and analyses how the democratisation of communication implemented by social media and the internet has made the obliteration of the race question in the public debate harder and harder.<sup>5</sup>

The exclusion of Black people from the media, however, has historically interested women in larger numbers than men, as observed by Moya Bailey who has coined the term ‘misogynoir’ to indicate specifically “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture” (2021, 1). If gender and colour confer a visual ‘normativity’ from which the bodies of Black women are excluded as they do not comply with the dominant “somatic norm” (Puwar 2004), in aural communication such normativity (or the lack thereof) is not detectable through the materiality of the body, but rather through the immateriality of the voice (Tiffe, Hoffmann 2017). In their feminist reading of podcasting as a medium of resistance,<sup>6</sup> Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann point out that marginalised subjects in general, including women, and especially Black women, are expected to be invisible and not to take up social space, even sonic space. Precisely because the female voice is generally considered as “deviant” (Tiffe, Hoffmann 2017, 116) and “[n]umerous popular press articles have been written criticizing the traditionally feminized qualities of women’s voices, including: vocal fry, upspeak, the use of the word ‘like,’ and women using curse words, among others” (117), women, and especially Black women and women

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**5** On this issue, listen specifically to the interview with British rapper and actor Riz in Episode 8, “The Anti-Racist Renaissance”.

**6** In Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann’s incipit of the article, the authors reveal the strategies through which they articulate their resistance, which include research, irony and humor and competence in utilising technology and social media: “The authors of this paper host a podcast called Feminist Killjoys, PhD. Every week, we research and compile notes about our topic; set up technology to record, talk, and laugh for an hour; manage our way through software in order to edit the files; and utilize social media to publicize” (115).

of Color, are increasingly using podcasts to enact resistance through a use of their voice that defies hegemonic vocal rules as traditionally enforced in broadcast journalism, and thus construct a physical media space in which (Black) female bodies and their voices are free to rewrite the rules:

we understand podcasts as a medium from which to better understand the ways in which women are uniquely subjugated in the media, and, more importantly, how this medium becomes a tool of resistance. (118)

Pointing to the intersection of race and gender, Moya Bailey claims that Black women are using social media not only to fight misogynoir, but also to create healthy practices through which they deconstruct stereotypical imaginaries and produce new, complex, and diverse counterpublic representations. In conceptualising the notion of a “digital alchemy” (2021, 23) as “the ways that women of color, Black women, and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks in particular transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media that recode the failed scripts that negatively impact their lives” (24), she distinguishes between “defensive” and “generative” digital alchemy: the former responds to misogynoir and deconstructs perpetuated stereotypes that have informed and continue to inform collective imaginaries; the latter is not moved by the necessity to respond to racialisation and marginalisation, but is rather projected into the present and the future (as much as present and future can be independent from the past) and based on the desire to create multifaceted representations.

In the second section of this chapter, we argue that the three podcasts that constitute our case studies create both defensive and generative alchemies in the Italian society, as podcasters aim at making their voices heard in a context of intersectional discrimination and at questioning the Italian white population and its role in the reproduction of structural racism, while at the same time they introduce new words to articulate the discourse on race from their situated perspectives and produce counternarratives about their personal experience and how it intersects the experience of other Black people in Italy and Europe.

### 3 Antiracist Voices: Podcasts and the Shaping of a Postcolonial Digital Archive

Since 2010, as Camilla Hawthorne notes (2019), young Italians of African origins have begun to meet on social platforms and create spaces for discussion about the specific African descendant experience in a context of structural racism and a lack of cultural decolonisation. This trend experienced a significant increase during 2020 and 2021 as a result of the wave of antiracist mobilisations following the murder of George Floyd on the one hand, and, on the other, the exponential growth in the use of the internet and of technological tools in a context of lockdowns and social distancing. The last two years have seen a proliferation of online formats, programs and initiatives promoted by racialised people, who have used digital tools to keep a sense of community, activism, and political discussion alive, at a time when the offline world did not allow in person interaction. It is in this panorama that the production of podcasts devoted to the issues of race, colonial memory, and the Black experience in relation to the Italian context is situated. The podcasts selected here (*Sulla razza*, *Black Coffee* and *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman*) are conceived and conducted almost entirely by Italian Black women and women of Color and constitute a digital postcolonial archive that contribute to the production of race studies in a collaborative, participatory and horizontal way. These podcasts are included in a broader context of digital cultural activism, in which they are configured as media of “digital resistance” (Bailey 2021) and encourage the creation of alliances and “alternative networks of debate” (Jackson, Bailey, Welles 2020, xxxiii).

#### 3.1 *Sulla razza* (About Race)

*Sulla razza* was hosted by Nathasha Fernando, Nadeesha Uyangoda and Maria Catena Mancuso and aired between February and July 2021.<sup>7</sup> The podcast is structured in twelve thirty-minute episodes. In each of them, a word or an expression (such as tokenism, colourism, minority model myth) from the Anglo-American discourse on race is translated into the Italian language and context. The structure of the podcast highlights its didactic and pedagogical connotation: the project was born with a well-defined deadline and a precise duration and cadence in the publication of the episodes (twice a

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<sup>7</sup> Nathasha Fernando is Visiting Lecturer at the University of Westminster, Nadeesha Uyangoda is a writer and freelance author, and Maria Catena Mancuso is a web content editor.



month, thirty minutes for each episode). Such pedagogical function is also conferred by the fact that the contents have a solid theoretical structure, in most cases the explanation of theoretical and historical topics is entrusted to Nathasha Fernando, who often assumes the role of the 'academic' and the speakers offer precise bibliographic references during and at the end of each episode. This academic connotation also appears to reinforce the validity of the content presented and fosters a sense of trust among listeners (Lindgren 2016). The episodes, then, are not structured as dialogues with a certain amount of freedom but take the form of a pre-set conversation with pre-written dialogues, in which each interlocutor plays a specific role and is tasked with addressing a specific part of the topic under discussion. This rhythm is interrupted only by brief contributions from external guests (such as Angelica Pesarini, Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau', Fred Kuwornu), who are asked specific questions, or by short excerpts from documentaries, songs, films, and other audiovisual contents. The centrality of the issue of race also emerges from the situated approach to social relations among the presenters. In the first episode, devoted to the term 'race', the racial identity of the speakers is made explicit, and the presence of a white speaker (Maria Catena Mancuso) is explained. By motivating Maria Catena Mancuso's participation as an ally and illustrating what it means to be a good ally, the presenters implicitly emphasise the necessary prominence of racialised people in the debate on race and racism. This positioning also determines the division of roles among the presenters – Maria Catena Mancuso holds a secondary role – and configures podcasting as a political practice. *Sulla razza* is the only one among the selected case studies to present a title in Italian and this, as the speakers assert, is a statement in itself. Uttering the word 'razza' in a national context that has constructed itself as postracial (Lombardi-Diop 2012) signals the need to fill this linguistic and conceptual void and to counter the way in which Italy identifies itself as immune from structural racism, generally attributed to other countries. This evasiveness means that the Italian lexicon and public debate lack the words to talk about racial issues in the Italian context, and the words already in use – such as the term 'razza' itself – are not recognised as necessary in order to name, and thus address, specific dynamics of oppression and privilege.<sup>8</sup> As Tatiana Petrovich

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<sup>8</sup> Since the end of World War II and after the social trauma of the Shoah, in Italy the term 'race' has become largely confined to the memory of the Holocaust and the Fascist Racial Laws (1938) and has obliterated the memory of the racist legislation in the colonies (1933, 1937, and 1940). The lack of a combined analysis of anti-Semitic racism and racism against the Black population in the African colonies has in turn not allowed for a proper assessment of Fascist raciology. The resistance to use the word 'race' in Italy at present follows two distinct trajectories: one is grounded in a 'colour-blindness'

Njegosh notes, echoing Edward Said's theorisation of "traveling theory", race travels, adapting and modifying itself according to different space-time coordinates: "race does not move automatically from one context to another, according to a linear and unidirectional pattern, but is 'translated' from one linguistic and cultural system to another (2012, 17).<sup>9</sup> This podcast explains and, in some cases, translates into Italian terms and expressions in order to name racial formations and to re-articulate these concepts in a different historical, social, cultural, and political framework. Each episode opens with a contextualisation of the selected word in the place where it originated – almost always the United States –, proceeds with its translation into the Italian cultural system, and analyses its different but contiguous function within Italian racial history. This emerges, for example, in the episode entitled "Coppie miste" (Mixed couples), in which the theme of interracial relationships is analysed starting from the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* legal case but is then situated in the *longue durée* of Italian colonial history. Such analysis shows the line of continuity – in terms of racial, gender and class constructions – between the Italian racial laws of 1938 and the stereotypes regarding mixed couples circulating in contemporary Italy.<sup>10</sup> The episode devoted to the N word opens with a portion of a speech by Martin Luther King and discusses the origin of the English terms 'negro', 'n\*\*\*er' and 'n\*\*\*a'. This issue is then connected with other problematic Italian expressions not imported from other countries but born in the Italian colonial context (such as 'fare un ambaradam' [making an ambaradam]).<sup>11</sup>

that tends to remove Italian colonial past and the racial question in Italy altogether; the other, instead, is motivated by the potential negative consequences intrinsic in the process of resurrecting racial categories in the specific context of Italy (and Europe), which presents profound differences from the US context. Such resistance is evident, for instance, in the Italian translation of Reni Eddo-Lodge's world-famous *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People about Race* as *Perché non parlo più di razzismo con le persone bianche*, where the issue discussed is 'razzismo' (racism) instead of 'razza' (race). This choice does not demonstrate a desire to avoid the discussion on the racial question, but rather cautions about a term perceived as problematic. At the same time, however, the term 'razza' is also employed in the context of race studies and antiracist activism by racialised and white subjects alike as a necessary analytical category to address structural racism in Italian past and present. The fact that the title of the podcast *Sulla razza* is centred on the term 'race' in Italian goes precisely in the direction of placing this social category at the centre of critical analysis.

**9** Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the authors'.

**10** The *Loving v. Virginia* case involved Mildred Loving, a woman of Colour, and Richard Loving, a white man, who were sentenced to one year in prison for marrying in violation of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which prohibited interracial marriages. In 1967, the US Supreme Court declared the Racial Integrity Act unconstitutional and overturned the conviction.

**11** The expression 'to make an ambaradam' originates from the massacre occurred on the Amba Aradam plateau (Ethiopia) on February 15, 1936, when Italian colonisers killed approximately 20,000 Ethiopian soldiers. This expression, which originates in

From this point of view, *Sulla razza* seems to take up Camilla Hawthorne's invitation (2019) to decentralise the United States from reflections about structural racism and the African diaspora and to focus on the importance that European colonialisms and racism have held in structuring global racism, including that of the United States.

### 3.2 *Black Coffee*

*Black Coffee*, directed by Ariam Tekle and Emmanuelle Maréchal, started airing in 2020 and is still on air.<sup>12</sup> The podcast deals with the process of identity construction for people of African descent in Italy and in Europe in general. Each episode is shaped around a specific issue – such as mental health in Black communities and aesthetic practices enacted by women of African descent – addressed in a conversation between the presenters and an expert on the selected issue. The structure of this podcast is more flexible and dynamic than *Sulla razza*, and is articulated in four seasons of seven episodes each, to which are added special episodes and specific columns – such as “Passato rimosso” [“Repressed Past”], conducted together with researcher and activist Marie Moise and focused on colonial history, or “Storie italiane (ig)note” [“(Un)known Italian stories”] created in collaboration with journalist Adil Mauro and centred on Black Italian people who have played a relevant role in Italian history. This dynamism is also determined by the different positioning of the two presenters: Ariam Tekle is Italian of Eritrean origins, while Emmanuelle Maréchal is French of Cameroonian origins and has lived in Italy for five years. Such diversity allows for the construction of a debate on Black communities in Italy that is in constant dialogue with the European context and that places the Italian racial question within a wider framework. Even though the language used is Italian, the English title suggests the desire of the speakers to project the podcast outside of national borders and to reach out to other Black communities in Europe. This purpose became more evident in November 2021, when *Black Coffee* received the Culture and Solidarity Fund: in the fourth season, the podcast is characterised by a more specifically European connotation through the production of episodes entirely in English and the inauguration of a section called “Exploring Black Europe”, in collaboration with Kwanza Musi Dos Santos (former hostess of the Instagram Page @lastanzadikwanza).

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Italian colonialism, has been depotentiated and has entered the Italian common language with the meaning of ‘making a mess’.

**12** Ariam Tekle is an Italian Eritrean videomaker based in Milan and Emmanuelle Maréchal is a French Cameroonian freelance copywriter and translator based in London.

The intimate and personal dimension typical of podcasts seems to apply, in the case of *Black Coffee*, not only to the listeners but also to the speakers, who have often stated that the podcast has granted them the opportunity to talk without filters about issues that are assigned little room for discussion in mainstream communication or that are addressed in a stereotypical way. As argued in the previous section, podcasting takes on a value which is both private and public: on the one hand, it is a liberating practice through which issues involving the personal dimension can be discussed in a space perceived as safe; on the other, it confers authority to the voices of those who personally experience the processes of discrimination and places these voices in dialogue with the community of listeners. *Black Coffee's* target audience provides valuable information about the role that this podcast assumes in the panorama of activism (digital and non-digital) of Italians of African descent. Although the podcast was born out of the need to foster debate about the lives of Black people in Italy and is therefore primarily aimed at Black communities, the hosts also intend to deconstruct the idea that racial issues and structural racism do not concern white society. *Black Coffee* is therefore also aimed at white people who want to reflect on the experiences of Black people in Italy and Europe and, at the same time, on their own role in the reproduction of a specific racial hierarchy. From this point of view, this podcast is in continuity with a trend that characterises the cultural activism of a new generation of Italian writers, artists, activists, and scholars of African descent, who not only analyse racism, but also directly question white society, confronting it with its responsibilities and discussing the many forms that privilege can take.

### 3.3 *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman*

*The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman*, conceived and directed by Benedicta Djumpha, started airing in 2020 and is still on air.<sup>13</sup> The podcast, not divided into seasons, is composed of forty-four episodes and presents the column “Diasporahood”, in which the main speaker hosts people from the African diaspora. From a technical point of view this podcast is the most ‘undisciplined’ of those analysed so far: it does not have a fixed structure (the episodes are weekly or bi-weekly, the “Diasporahood” column does not have a precise cadence but seems to occur randomly, and the duration of the episodes varies from an average of 30 minutes to a maximum of 95 minutes), there are no auditory contents other than the voice of the presenter, nor are there

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<sup>13</sup> Benedicta Djumpha is a Student Life Coordinator at Temple University in Rome and an activist in the association *Italiana senza cittadinanza*.

any sound effects (with the exception of a brief theme song which, however, is not utilised in all the episodes, nor does it constantly feature at the beginning or at the end of the episode). Ambient noises are clearly recognisable, and reveal a domestic and informal setting, which, as stated earlier, affords a higher degree of freedom, autonomy, and flexibility. As Richard Berry states, echoing Kate Lacey, this interconnection between social exposure and the domestic dimension, as well as the balance between the public and private valence of content, complicate the distinction between public and private and allow access to an “intimate soundscape” (Lacey 2014, 120, quoted in Berry 2016a) that in most other media does not assume a relevant role. Compared to the other podcasts analysed, the element of hyper-intimacy emerges more strongly in this case not only because the domestic setting is clearly perceptible – and the listeners are induced to visualise the image of the room – but also because the speaker’s oratorical style tends to address the listeners in the attempt to build an almost familial relationship with them (“You can call me Benny, my family and my friends they call me Benny”, episode 1) and also to involve them directly in conversations. Djumpah’s intended audience has a global dimension (in the opening and closing greetings, Djumpah often refers to the different time zones of her listenership – “Good morning or good night”, “I don’t know what time you are listening to this podcast”). This projection beyond Italian and European borders is reflected in the choice of English as the only language used, but also in the strong presence of multiple cultural references from other countries, continuously related to the Italian political and social context. Unlike the previous podcasts (especially *Sulla razza*), *Chronicles* does not have a pedagogical intent nor an explicit theoretical framework but is configured as a storytelling project with a strong personal connotation. As Djumpah affirms, the intent of the podcast is to tell the stories of Black Italian women precisely because the experience of Black Italians and Europeans enjoys less visibility. The themes of racism, misogyny, access to citizenship, anti-racist activism and Black identities are therefore translated into the language of everyday life and discussed starting from the speaker’s story, interests and passions (“This podcast means doing something for myself”, episode 1). The highly personal connotation of the contents, together with the presumably domestic setting, the tone of the speaker and the structure of the podcast, creates a bond between the listeners and the presenter, favoured by the fact that the medium is based on voice and sound:

audio stories [...] explore our lives through sounds and spoken words, intimately whispered into our ears. The personalized listening space created by headphones further accommodates the bond created between voices in the story and the listener. (Lindgren 2016, 24)

The narration of the host's own emotions and private experiences, as well as the informal connotation of the podcast, denote a different style from the podcasts previously analysed, as well as a different approach to the project's objective. *Chronicles* confers value to micro-stories which, together, delineate a broader historical and political landscape. This characteristic emerges not only in the personal approach to the narration but also in the fact that the speakers hosted in the episodes of the "Diasporahood" column are not known personalities, or 'experts' on certain issues, but rather they are people to whom Djumpah is affectively connected (her mother, Felicia Efua Annan, is the protagonist of episode 25; her best friend, Olivia Lifungula, is the protagonist of episode 29), as well as friends and fellow activists - Italian and non-Italian - with whom Djumpah comments on news, politics or current events related to the African Diaspora. Djumpah's choice to involve people affectively connected to her has a double effect: on the one hand it includes listeners in her affective circuit, on the other it gives visibility to the work, activism and voice of other racialised people who are from or are based in different places of the world. With *Chronicles* it emerges how, in the case of podcasting, the private dimension does not make the content private but rather facilitates raising awareness around political issues that have an impact on personal lives. Podcasting is a medium that can contribute to a wider context of digital cultural activism and that can enhance offline activism. This medium proposes a non-academic mode of production of race studies in Italy, centered on situated bodies and experiences and promotes alternatives to hegemonic forms of knowledge production.

#### 4 Conclusion

The case studies analysed show how podcasts constitute a particularly valuable digital tool for opening up spaces of discussion which, because of their digital nature, are able to remain active regardless of the contingencies of the offline world. In addition to fostering debate on issues traditionally excluded from public discourse, the podcasts examined also contribute to the construction of new communities and to the strengthening of already existing communities. They base their existence on the relationship with an audience that is continuously invited to participate and that, in response, shows interest in further relating to the hosts and the content (Berry 2016). The podcasts analysed are all accompanied by an apparatus of additional channels of communication and user engagement. This apparatus can be highly articulated, as in the case of *Sulla razza*, which offers, in addition to all the social channels, also an extremely well-maintained website in terms of graphics and usability, a newsletter and a dedicated section

on the Vice.com website; less articulated, as in the case of *Black Coffee*, which offers social channels and a basic website; and basic, as in the case of *The Chronicles of a Black Italian Women*, which is accompanied by an Instagram page. Regardless of the greater or lesser complexity of these additional apparatuses, all podcasts promote interactivity with the audience even outside the podcast itself, offering additional contents and insights and engaging with the audience through stories and comments on Facebook and Instagram. As Lundström and Lundström observe, podcasts differ from other forms of recorded dialogue because they are participatory media, capable of creating connections with the audience both by inviting guests into episodes and by engaging in conversation with listeners, who thus become “secondary speakers” and play an active role in the production of content (Lundström, Lundström 2021, 291). In the cases analysed, the communities gathered around the podcasts are engaged in the production and promotion of a discourse on the themes of race, diaspora, racism and its intersection with further discriminations starting from their own position as “raced and gendered counterpublics” (Jackson, Bailey, Welles 2020, xxiii), connected in different ways to the Italian context. The podcasts analysed here also promote a transnational European perspective, as they contribute to the formation and corroboration of networks among racialised communities and put into dialogue personal experiences of racialisation as well as theories and methodologies across national borders and citizenships, connecting countries whose national formation is grounded in a colonialism systematically disavowed (Habed, Ponzanesi 2018) as the racist violence perpetuated in European neocolonial politics. These podcasts thus promote a postcolonial and decolonial critique of Italian and European racial histories and contribute to the development of transnational counterpublics committed to challenge European “white innocence” (Wekker 2016).

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# Methodologies of Blackness in Italy: Past, Present, and Futures

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**Abstract** This chapter explores Italy's methodologies of Blackness in relation to post-coloniality by tracing a trajectory of emergence from the field of literary fiction to current artistic practices characterised by a broader diversification of forms and media. It contends that these practices are calling postcolonial publics into existence by adopting a historically grounded and future-oriented approach. In addressing Italy's fraught relation with coloniality and national formation, I connect the institutional and political challenges these practices are facing to some of their most significant features, such as collaboration and strategic adaptation.

**Keywords** Italy. Blackness. Coloniality. Literature of migration. New media.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Beginnings: Literature of Migration. – 2.1 History and Coloniality. – 2.2 A Difficult Emergence. – 3 The Present: Methodologies of Blackness and Postcolonial Publics. – 3.1 Collaborative Practices. – 3.2 Strategic Adaptations. – 3.3 Revisiting History and Envisioning Alternative Futures. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

In a recent book that explores the intersections of culture and digitality among African diasporic communities, Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam (2021, ix) write that “Black people have always been intimately familiar with technologies, both repressive and emancipatory”, and that it is crucial to “emphasize how Black communities have taken advantage of the affordances of technology to assert their humanity, histories, knowledges, and expertise” (2021, xiii). Baker

Josephs and Risam aim to intervene in current debates on digital humanities by displacing the field from its Anglophone and white-centred methodological approaches and theoretical models. To do so, they invoke Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) and propose to investigate digital practices that span across global geographies of cultural production. They term these practices "methodologies of Blackness" (2021, xiv). Drawing on this theoretical framework, in this essay I explore the emergence of methodologies of Blackness in Italy, a country that has been traditionally resistant to acknowledging the cultural and artistic contributions of Black communities to its history, society, and national imagination. In response to this unwillingness, methodologies of Blackness have forcefully drawn attention to Italy's colonial histories and persisting racial inequalities, while foregrounding Blackness as a site of artistic invention, political resistance, and social emancipation.

Beginning in the 1990s, the publication of literary texts that addressed the experience of Afro-Italian and migrant subjects - the so-called literature of migration - has launched a trajectory of emergence from the restricted field of literary fiction to wider and non-specialised audiences. Today, a wide range of multimedia and transdisciplinary projects testify to the vitality of cultural and artistic practices that centre on Blackness to envision decolonial horizons. By exploring this trajectory, this essay approaches postcolonial publics "as *made* and *emergent*, as being called into existence" (Baker, Blaagaard 2016a, 5), and wants to trace the formation of a postcolonial consciousness among Italian audiences.

Methodologically, I do so by drawing into conversation methodologies of Blackness and postcoloniality. There are several reasons behind this choice. First, the literary and digital projects I study participate in the broader project of decolonisation by envisioning a pluriversal world (Mignolo 2011) that accommodates forms of knowledge, sensibilities, and worldviews that coloniality has historically suppressed or deemed inferior. If decolonisation requires a "symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings" (Boehmer 1995, 3), Italy's methodologies of Blackness have deployed artistic and symbolic strategies to redefine discursive practices and, in doing so, to actively intervene in the social and political fields. Secondly, in the Italian context, the postcolonial approach has been particularly productive for connecting forms of racial and colonial oppression that have been experienced globally to political histories and social phenomena that are peculiar to Italy. Indeed, the study of Italy's postcoloniality, as Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2014, 3-4) have stressed, requires that we take into consideration several determinants: "the emigrant nature of Italy's colonization of Africa"; Italy's "internal colonialism" in relation to its South; forms of "indirect postcoloniality" that arise from the substantial presence of mi-

grant communities from ex-colonies of other European empires; and the geographical position of Italy at the centre of the Mediterranean basin. In this sense, bringing together postcoloniality and methodologies of Blackness allows me to develop a critical approach that moves across scales of analysis while being attentive to contextual specificities. On the one hand, “the transhistorical and geographically expansive nature of postcoloniality” (Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2014, 4) is coupled with a focus on localised political struggles; on the other, Baker Josephs and Risam’s call to develop a “method for incorporating and foregrounding transnationality and cross-temporality” (2021, xi) informs my exploration of literary and digital projects that engage Italy’s history to actively intervene in the present.

It is then from this localised yet world-oriented perspective that I argue for the fruitfulness of linking postcoloniality to methodologies of Blackness, as a way of exploring Italy’s own colonial past and histories of racialisation, as well as the traces that this recent and less recent past has left in the present. Only through this exploration can the boundaries of Italianness and of cultural belonging be radically rethought. By understanding postcoloniality as a transnational, history-driven and future-oriented analytic, it also becomes possible to revive the political imperative articulated by Antonio Gramsci ([1948-51] 2014, 1376) – whose work has been key to postcolonial theorists in Italy and abroad – when he wrote that “the beginning of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what critical elaboration really is; that is to say, it is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory”. Creating such inventory and making it available to Italian and European audiences through literary and cultural practices continues to be a most urgent task – and the only one that can carve a path into decolonial futures.

Finally, the study of methodologies of Blackness as postcolonial practices compels us to attend to how theories and analytics travel across cultural fields and adapt, not without frictions, to local contexts. In Italy, whereas the first forays into postcoloniality were aimed at translating theories originating in the Anglophone and Francophone spaces, starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s a school of Italian postcolonial studies has begun to address the complexities of Italy’s own postcolonial condition. More recently, a similar process of localised adaptation of the analytical categories of global Black studies has informed the work of the Black Mediterranean Collective, whose intervention wants to “provincialize North American approaches to the study of Blackness” (Danewid et al. 2021, 16). In engaging these critical traditions from the perspective of Italian literary and cultural studies, this essay traces the progressive formation of postcolonial publics in Italy. It does so by attending to the complex challenges that Italy’s emerging methodologies of Blackness

are facing, and by showing that only a future-oriented and context-attentive approach can address and overcome them.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Beginnings: Literature of Migration

### 2.1 History and Coloniality

The partly arbitrary yet conventionally accepted beginning of *letteratura della migrazione* (literature of migration) in Italy coincides with a shocking event: the murder of South African migrant and agricultural labourer Jerry Essan Masslo in August 1989. From a political and legal perspective, Masslo's murder exposed with tragic clarity the inadequacy of Italy's legislation on immigration. After escaping Apartheid South Africa, Masslo had reached Italy, where his application for political asylum was rejected because he was not born in Eastern Europe. This principle of geographic limitation, which established that refugee status could only be granted to individuals fleeing the USSR, shed light on the arbitrary differentiation between migrants who deserved protection (refugees and asylum seekers) and those who allegedly did not (the infamous economic migrants) – a distinction that continues to shape perceptions of immigration today. Masslo's murder led to a change in legislation. In 1990, a new law (Legge Martelli) that redefined immigration policies and eliminated the geographic limitation principle was approved. Most significantly, this tragic event prompted a reckoning with Italy's changing social fabric and with the emergence of new identities that would further destabilise an ideologically precarious national homogeneity.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this sociopolitical framework that a series of texts that would have been later categorised as 'literature of migration' began to appear. Primarily interested in exploring the condition of migrancy and in denouncing forms of everyday and institutional racism from an autobiographical perspective, these texts oscillated between journalism and literature and were often co-written or prefaced by an

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**1** A note on my own positionality as a scholar: I write about questions of migration, Blackness, and cultural belonging from a position of privilege within the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2011). I am a white (or, as someone has told me, 'spicy white') Italian scholar who has mostly worked in Anglo-American academic spaces. My family history has been shaped by Italy's internal colonialism and mass emigration from the South, and this has deeply informed my thinking about racial categorisations, whose plasticity and historical mutability I have witnessed in the different countries where I have lived.

**2** From 1988 to 1994, Italian journalist Massimo Ghirelli hosted a rather popular TV show, *Nonsolonegro* (Not Just Black), on immigration and racism. Masslo was interviewed by Ghirelli a few months before being killed.

Italian journalist (typically a man), who would lend his institutional and symbolic power to legitimise the migrant's voice and thus create an audience that was still non-existent. Canonical in this sense is one of the most successful texts of this phase of emergence, *Io venditore di elefanti* (1990), co-written by Pap Khouma and Oreste Pivetta. These forms of collaboration were highly problematic, being based on the paradigm of the native informant and often motivated by self-congratulatory humanitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, these initial experiments drew attention to the fact that Italy, historically a country of emigrants, was turning into a host country for migration fluxes of increasing magnitude. Most importantly, these texts became the starting point in the formation of Italy's postcolonial consciousness as they encouraged a reflection on the ideological construction of Italianness - which had been coalescing around the intersecting axes of coloniality and migration.

As Rhiannon Noel Welch (2016, 27) has convincingly argued, the constitution of Italy as a nation-state was founded on the production of its citizen-subjects in biopolitical terms. Crucially, this happened in three interconnected areas: "the southern question, migration, and colonialism, in which Italian racial discourse took shape". In other words, the invention of Italianness as a biopolitical and racial category meant that both the mass emigration of Italians in the late nineteenth century and Italy's colonial expansion (which began in the same decades) had to be reframed as naturalised outcomes of Italy's vitality and colonial reproductivity (Welch 2016, 6). This process has been decisive in shaping Italy's self-image as a country of emigrants while foreclosing a serious engagement with Italy's colonial past. When literature of migration began to emerge in the 1990s, these structures of self-perception had hardly been questioned. It is then within this framework that we should understand, on the one hand, the tendency of the cultural and literary field to analyse those earlier literary examples within the reassuring framework of a politically deflated multiculturalism that fails to interrogate the deep foundations of national belonging, and on the other, the particularly challenging process of emergence of postcolonial publics in Italy.<sup>4</sup>

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**3** In parallel to more established publishing channels, literature of migration has been circulating through street sellers, small independent presses, and self-publishing ventures. Among the numerous critical studies on literature of migration, those that offer a more exhaustive overview of its history, formal features, and themes, are: Quaquarelli 2010; Pezzarossa, Rossini 2011; Mengozzi 2013; Comberiat, Pisanelli 2021.

**4** In a scathing retrospective analysis of literature of migration, Fulvio Pezzarossa (2018, 321) rightly criticises scholarly assessments that idealise multiculturalism and creolisation, and in so doing reinforce "the oppressive infantilisation of the other" ("la soggiogante infantilizzazione dell'altro"). Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian are by the Author.

## 2.2 A Difficult Emergence

Developing a postcolonial consciousness always involves addressing coloniality in its historical and epistemological depth. In Italy, this has been done through scholarship and works of fiction that have critically challenged myths about Italianness. In 2005, historian Angelo Del Boca, who spent his career deconstructing narratives about Italy's supposedly minor or less brutal colonialism, publishes *Italiani brava gente?*, a book that debunks the persisting and self-absolving myth of Italians 'good people' (*brava gente*). Around the same time, two anthologies of short stories – *Pecore nere* (Black sheep, 2005) and *Amori bicolori* (Bicolour love stories, 2008) – bring to Italian publics the work of so-called 'new Italians', in which the authors call for a radical rethinking of Italianness and cultural belonging by foregrounding the experience of Black and migrant subjects. Ingy Mubiayi, an Italian writer and cultural activist of Egyptian and Congolese background, has recently described this period as a moment of euphoria and political utopia. A period, she adds, that regrettably did not last long, due to a lack of strategic communication and to increasingly hostile political conditions.<sup>5</sup> These examples, when read along Mubiayi retrospective analysis, point to a pattern that has characterised the laborious emergence of literature of migration and, more generally, of a postcolonial consciousness in Italy: on the one hand, the work of a small but vocal group of writers, activists, and cultural actors has brought to public attention questions of identity, migration, and citizenship; on the other, and despite substantial demographic and social changes, the fundamental unwillingness to question Italy's constructed self-image has resulted in institutional and political blockages, as well as in enduring and systemic forms of marginalisation.

Such marginalisation has also depended on a crucial definitional problem. So far, I have been using *letteratura della migrazione* (literature of migration) as the most widely accepted denomination. Yet, this label is in many ways inaccurate: some of the writers 'of migration' are not migrant, since they were born in Italy; others do not necessarily see migration as the defining problematic of their work; still others reject the categorisation in toto as ghettoising. The plethora of definitions that critics have proposed – to name just a few, *letteratura italoфона, minore, dell'immigrazione, postcoloniale, afroitaliana* (Italophone, minor, of immigration, postcolonial, Afro-Italian) – reveals a certain anxiety, if not puzzlement, about the thematic and conceptual boundaries of the object of study. This definitional anxie-

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<sup>5</sup> These comments were made during an online event ("La scrittura come contronarrazione dell'immigrazione") organised by *Words4Link*.



ty, along with the cultural conservatism of Italian academia, has prevented the full recognition and inclusion of these texts into the contemporary canon of Italian literature.

Nonetheless, the literary field has played and continues to play an important role as a partially autonomous and mediating field of struggle (Bourdieu 1996): a struggle for visibility, for symbolic and cultural capital, and ultimately, a struggle to actively intervene in the social space. As the first literary example of methodologies of Blackness in Italy, literature of migration has foregrounded the experience of Black and migrant communities to open a collective discussion about coloniality, national belonging, and postcolonial futures. In the following sections, I address how these artistic practices have progressively emerged from the restricted field of literary fiction to forcefully reclaim spaces of expression that could engage wider publics, thus taking up the project of developing Italy's postcolonial consciousness through narrative, digital, and multimedia projects.

### 3 The Present: Methodologies of Blackness and Postcolonial Publics

#### 3.1 Collaborative Practices

Within literary studies, critics of literature of migration have proposed to replace *letteratura* (literature) with *scritture* (writings) as a way of signalling the importance of memoirs, autobiographies and other non-fictional forms.<sup>6</sup> This is certainly a welcome opening. Yet, it does not fully account for the formal and mediatic range of current cultural practices, which span from more canonical genres (fiction, non-fiction, journalism) to film, podcasting, music, TV series, and digital projects. It is then at the juncture of writings of migration, non-literary forms of expression, and postcolonial engagements with Italy's society and history that I identify the political potential of current methodologies of Blackness for articulating decolonial futures.

Collaboration has proved to be crucial to this end. Consider for instance the recent collection of short stories *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Future. Tomorrow narrated by the voices of today, 2019). The anthology consists of eleven short stories written by Afro-Italian women. It was curated by Igiaba Scego, one of the most vocal and recognised Afro-Italian authors, prefaced by Camilla Haw-

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance *Leggere il testo e il mondo* (Pezzarossa, Rossini 2011), whose subtitle is *Ventanni di scritture della migrazione in Italia* (Twenty years of writings of migration in Italy).

thorne, a US-based scholar with “African American and Italian roots” (2019, 21), and postfaced by Prisca Augustoni, a poet and professor working on multilingualism and diaspora in Brazil. The authors of the short stories are Italian women of African descent, whose family and personal histories intersect with global histories of migration, colonisation, and border crossing. Because they belong to different generations, some were born in Italy, others migrated to Italy at a young age and settled there permanently, still others have left Italy to work or study abroad. While the unifying thread of the anthology is the authors’ affective attachment to different African cultures and to a renewed idea of Italianness, the stories articulate a diversified network of affiliations that can be simultaneously – or alternatively – national, linguistic, and ethnic. As a consequence, the anthology challenges dichotomous narratives that monolithically oppose cultures and languages without considering the complexity of transversal and often contradictory attachments. This is a direct consequence of the collective nature of their work. Most importantly, what distinguishes *Future* from previous collaborative endeavours is, firstly, the rejection of the power asymmetries intrinsic to the ‘Italian journalist/migrant writer’ model; and secondly, the awareness that the symbolic and cultural work of writing is part of a larger political project that transcends literary expression.

In stressing the connections between emancipatory politics and collaborative intellectual labour, *Future* compellingly illustrates how, by reclaiming a space of expression and cultural participation, emerging methodologies of Blackness are making “affective claims to agency” (Papacharissi 2014, 119) that are firmly grounded in current political struggles. In the preface, Igiaba Scego makes this quite clear when she directs a collective *J'accuse* to Italy’s cultural field and political class. Their unwillingness to recognise Afro-Italian identities and to view Blackness as Italianness prompts her to characterise this reluctance as “an open betrayal” (Scego 2019, 13). It is important to note here that Scego’s activist work of consciousness-raising is fuelled by very concrete sociopolitical struggles, particularly the fight to reform Italy’s citizenship law, which is founded on the principle of *jus sanguinis* (in Latin, right of blood). By favouring supposedly authentic blood affiliations, the current law prevents children of migrants who were born in Italy to become citizens until they turn eighteen – when they can begin a bureaucratically nightmarish application process. Despite several street rallies, cultural campaigns, and very timid attempts to reform the law in 2015, millions of Italians born from foreign parents are still negated citizenship rights.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In 2015, the left-wing government tried to introduce the so-called *jus culturae* (right of culture), which would have tied citizenship rights to having finished a cycle of school-

Within this context, *Future* articulates a discursive project that is most profoundly shaped by the lived experiences and political engagement of its collaborators, who are both literary authors and members of the cultural association Razzismo Brutta Storia (Racism Is an Ugly Business). Since 2008, Razzismo brutta storia has been actively promoting anti-racist culture and practices through educational initiatives, workshops, and forums. Significantly, and in a tragic parallel with the beginning of literature of migration, the association was born in response to the murder of Abdel William Guibrem, aka Abba, a Black Italian teenager who was killed in a brutal racist attack by two white Italian men who had accused him of stealing a box of cookies from their store. The murder of Abba in 2008, just like the murder of Jerry Essan Masslo in 1989, of Samb Modou e Diop Mor in 2011, of Soumalia Sacko and Idy Diene in 2018, of Willy Monteiro Duarte in 2020, and of Youns El Boussettaoui in 2021 stand as hideous proofs that anti-Black violence continues to be a tragic reality in Italy, and that the cultivation of an anti-racist consciousness remains, despite self-absolving narratives of tolerance and multiculturalism, a most urgent collective responsibility, which members of Razzismo brutta storia have placed at the core of their political and cultural work. Their projects and initiatives range from workshops in elementary and middle schools to a web series on migration and social inequalities, and from promotional events for films and documentaries to musical performances in juvenile prisons.

Furthermore, because the collective Razzismo brutta storia is almost entirely composed of women, the collaborative element intersects with the deliberate choice of challenging gendered modes of knowledge production. In this way, the paradigm of the individual male intellectual producing knowledge to be delivered to the masses, which postcolonial writers and grassroots political movement have been questioning for decades, gets further eroded. By embracing the notion of “intellectual labor as collectively produced through social movements, digital technologies, and different forms of activism” (Ponzanesi, Habel 2018, xlili), this transdisciplinary and non-hierarchised ‘future’ collective experiments with alternative forms of collaborative knowledge production and dissemination, disrupts gendered ideas of intellectual labour, and grounds its work in social struggles and emancipatory politics.

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ing in Italy. Not only was the proposed reform shut down by the Italian Senate in 2017, but in 2018, a newly elected right-wing coalition changed the waiting time for the application process from two to four years, effectively extending the state of uncertainty and lack of rights of thousands of petitioners. Consider also that ISTAT has calculated that, as of 2018, there were more than one million second-generation children and young adults born in Italy without citizenship rights. See “Identità e percorsi di integrazione” 2020.

### 3.2 Strategic Adaptations

Among the modes of artistic production and political engagement directed at non-literary audiences, film and videography have become increasingly central for rethinking constructions of Italianness in relation to Blackness. In 2018, Fred Kudjo Kuwornu, an activist and filmmaker, created the multimedia project “Blaq•It”, as well as a web-page (blackitalia.info) with the goal of giving visibility to the complex universe of Afro-Italianness “without political interferences”.<sup>8</sup> In foregrounding the importance of producing knowledge outside institutional frameworks and their stifling requirements, BlackItalia aligns itself with practices of “citizen media” (Rodríguez 2001; Stephansen 2016) - which, as scholars have highlighted, are characterised by the pursuit of a “non-institutionalized agenda” (Baker, Blaagaard 2016a, 1) and by the combination of virtuality and presence, digitality and concreteness. One of the projects of BlackItalia is a web series of short videos focusing on the work and experiences of Afro-Italian artists, musicians, filmmakers, bloggers, and entrepreneurs. In one of the episodes, Naths Grazia Sukubo and Bellamy Okot discuss the collaborative blog and web magazine they started in 2015 to challenge the invisibility of Black Italians in traditional media, *Afroitalian Souls*. During the conversation, Bellamy Okot poignantly captures the importance of citizen media practices when institutional media have willingly failed to address the emergence of new subjectivities. “The reality has *already* changed”, she points out, and then adds: “However, cultural institutions, the media, and those who are in power are not willing to show this new face of Italy”.<sup>9</sup>

It is this new face of Italy that methodologies of Blackness are forcefully drawing attention to through various strategic endeavours. More recently, activists and creatives have focused on leveraging the global visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this case, the challenge has been to build connections with transnational struggles for racial justice without neglecting Italy’s contextual specificities in relation to questions of race, belonging, and citizenship. An example of this productive yet complex dialogue is the Vice-produced documentary series *Black Lives Matter: A Global Reckoning*, whose first episode centres on Italy.<sup>10</sup> In the episode, African American journalist Alzo Shade travels to Italy and interviews a group of Black Italians to better understand their most pressing political concerns and

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<sup>8</sup> See the manifesto of BlackItalia (<https://www.blackitalia.info>) and their declared goal of “making visible the invisible”.

<sup>9</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmgeyU2AMPA&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmgeyU2AMPA&feature=emb_title).

<sup>10</sup> The documentary can be accessed here: [https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/show/black-lives-matter-a-global-reckoning](https://video.vice.com/en_us/show/black-lives-matter-a-global-reckoning).

how they might differ from those of the African American community. In the course of the episode, the interviewees discuss exclusionary construction of Italianness, Italy's colonial history, and the exploitation of Black agricultural laborers in Southern Italy within the framework of racial capitalism. Because of the global reach and symbolic prestige of the producing platform, documentaries such as *Black Lives Matter: A Global Reckoning* are able to reach transnational audiences. At the same time, they risk reinforcing a quite problematic narrative of belatedness or secondariness, as if Italy's struggles for racial justice and inclusion required a symbolic legitimation to validate their claims. This preoccupation emerges vividly in a recent conversation between Angelica Pesarini and Camilla Hawthorne, in which Hawthorne (2020, 73) voices her worries about "the usual refrain about Italy having to work harder to catch up with the level of political consciousness achieved by Black communities in the United States, as if there existed a single, linear path that every Black community in the world had to follow to achieve the right level of political consciousness". The key word here is 'right', whereby Hawthorne signals the problematic conflation of the historically proven fact that the struggles of the African American community are tied to longer and more brutal histories of oppression and systemic racism, with an implicit and questionable standard of moral and symbolic legitimacy.

These considerations, in touching upon the broader question of cultural hegemony, might also help to explain, without justifying it, the regrettable resistance encountered by anti-racist struggles in Italy. In the same conversation, Pesarini (2020, 75) writes that the reception of the Black Lives Matter movement has brought to light the presence of a young, multiracial, and politically active generation, but also the "inadequacy of [Italy's] white, left-wing antiracism, tied to the 1970s". This inadequacy is certainly connected to an unwillingness – common to the entire political spectrum – to address Italy's own racialised national formation. But it is also premised on the mischaracterisation of any social analytic, theory, or political framework coming from the United States as neoimperial, particularly among radical left-wing groups. In this sense, the creation of postcolonial publics in Italy faces two major blockages deriving from opposite yet equally dangerous attitudes: the first flattens global anti-racist struggles by neglecting the specificities of diverse cultural spaces; the second aprioristically rejects any of their claims because it deems them inherently hegemonic. If, as Hawthorne suggests, it is crucial to cultivate a critical approach when absorbing and readapting analytical concepts and political demands coming from dominant spaces, this effort should not result in a self-absolving attitude that mistakes forms of transnational solidarity between marginalised groups for cultural imperialism.

### 3.3 Revisiting History and Envisioning Alternative Futures

Maintaining a critical perspective while strategically integrating and reframing concepts developed in the Anglophone space is the central objective of a recent podcast series, *Sulla razza* (On Race, 2021), created by Nadeesha Uyangoda, Nathasha Fernando and Maria Catena Mancuso. Collaborative both in its nature and in its delivery, created by three women from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, and attentive to the nuances of Italy's history and contemporary society, *Sulla razza* translates a series of key concepts originating in the United States (such as colourism, model minority, tokenism, and intersectional feminism), and provides Italian audiences with a critical vocabulary and discursive tools to navigate questions of race and belonging. This transcultural work deploys a pedagogical approach while presenting complex ideas in a fresh and conversational tone. The podcast is accessible yet rigorous, and it can thus be seen as an effective instance of a travelling theory (Said 1983) that, rather than being domesticated and neutralised, is reworked and readapted for the context in which it is received. If, in Said's words, "the point of theory [...] is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile" (2000, 421), *Sulla razza* demonstrates the potential of emerging media aimed at non-specialised audiences for transforming travelling theories into site-specific analytical tools. At the same time, it proves that this goal can be achieved without underestimating how and why theories travel, that is to say, without neglecting the unequal distribution of symbolic and cultural power that determines their circulation and reception.

Current artistic practices also highlight how calling postcolonial publics into existence requires the cultivation of a different historical consciousness. This is what Daphne Di Cinto, a filmmaker and actress, has done with *Il Moro* (The Moor, 2021), a short film centred on the figure of Alessandro De Medici, the first Black Duke of Florence from 1532 until his assassination in 1537. The illegitimate son of Pope Clement VII and of an unknown mother (a peasant or an enslaved servant), Alessandro is referred to by several historians of the time as 'the moor', due to his darker complexion and to other physical traits associated with people of African descent.<sup>11</sup> The short film, which

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**11** There has been a lot of scholarly debates about Alessandro De Medici's race and about his mother's identity, provenance, and class status. However, as Mary Gallucci acutely points out, these debates are interesting insofar as they demonstrate the complex and contradictory process whereby racial categories get naturalised. Commenting on the shifting racial descriptors employed by Italian historians, Gallucci writes: "from metaphorically mulatto and suspiciously Moorish to 'unquestionably black,' the categorical assertions by historians from the nineteenth century onwards demonstrate the increasing reification of race and the imperative to isolate difference" (2015, 46).

has been independently funded by anonymous backers on Indiegogo, is part of the wider project of revisiting Italy's history through a symbolically prestigious figures – a member of the De Medici dynasty – in order to give visibility to repressed histories of Blackness in Italy. Most importantly, the short film wants to draw connections and parallels with the present. As Di Cinto provocatively asks, “if the first Duke of Florence was someone we would call today ‘second generation’, why after five-hundred years is this debate still open?”.<sup>12</sup> Di Cinto is referring here to debates about citizenship – which, as I have shown, remains the most important political battle for more than one million Italians who are still legally excluded from it.

In stressing that the erasure of histories of Blackness constitutes the ideological foundation of structural racism today, *Il Moro* further demonstrates how this work of historical excavation has moved from more traditional academic research (Del Boca 1976-84; Labanca 2006; Stefani 2007) to other expressive forms and media. Consider in this sense the digital mapping project “Postcolonial Italy”, which, as “a collaborative project [...] of digital public history”, maps the traces of Italy's colonial past in the streets of some of its major cities – Bolzano, Cagliari, Firenze, Rome, Turin, and Venice.<sup>13</sup> As the buildings, streets, and monuments pinned on the digital maps are contextualised and made available to those who might unknowingly walk through them – concretely or virtually – Italy's colonial past comes to light in everyday spaces and in the lived geography of the city. In this way, the project contributes, through free and open access knowledge, to redressing what postcolonial scholars have defined as Italy's “colonial unconscious” (Ponzanesi 2012, 52) and “colonial amnesia” (Mellino 2012, 91) – that is, the obliteration from the nation's collective memory of its colonial past.

Thanks to the trajectory of emergence that I have discussed so far – of literature of migration first, and of transdisciplinary artistic practices more recently – cultural spaces that had been traditionally insulated from emancipatory political struggles have had to come to terms with the forceful demands of new generations of Italians. In the field of pop music for instance, it is today much more common to hear singers and pop icons – such as Ghali, Alessandro Mamhoud, Marracash, or Elodie – foreground their migratory and multiracial background while unapologetically claiming their full and unquestionable Italianness. These artists have leveraged their success and visibility in mainstream media to celebrate the cultures that have shaped them. Pop singer Elodie, in a recent interview for *Vogue Italy*, has attributed her penchant for frequent aesthetic and stylistic trans-

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/il-moro-the-moor>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.postcolonialitaly.com>.

formation to her mother, a Black woman from Guadeloupe: “I think I have taken [this desire for transformation] from my mother, who often changed hairstyle, as it is common in Black culture” (2021, 208). At the same time, institutionalised media have often toned down the social denunciation – of racism, class inequality, and gender hierarchies – which remains central to the work of artists who are less visible in mainstream culture. This is the case of Karima 2G, a Black rapper and beatmaker, whose songs denounce police brutality and racist rhetoric in public and political discourse, while advocating for the rights of Italians with migratory background. Karima 2G’s assertive participation in urgent political struggles is already visible in her artistic pseudonym, where 2G foregrounds her status as a ‘second-generation immigrant’. Furthermore, her artistic and political work is particularly significant because, through the transcultural lens that characterises the most powerful expressions of methodologies of Blackness, she explicitly refers to Afrofuturism as a source of inspiration (Fabbri 2020). Afrofuturism, she writes in a recent article/manifesto, enables Afro-Italian women to become subjects of their own stories and “contribute[s] to our liberation and to our future” (2021, 93).

#### 4 Conclusion

If the increased visibility of Black singers and musicians in institutionalised media testifies to the creation of more inclusive spaces, a rhetoric of celebration and forms of selective inclusivity risk marginalising more radical and politically conscious voices. In this sense, the complex dynamics that entangle Italy’s methodologies of Blackness, post-colonial engagements with the nation’s past, and activist approaches to the present reveal the long-standing and thorny challenge that emergent forms of cultural production have always faced under regimes of global capitalism. To use Raymond Williams’ categories, as soon as emergent cultural practices manifest a potential for threatening the status quo, “the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins” (1977, 124). We should not then underestimate the risk of being incorporated into the dominant and thus politically neutralised, given that, as Williams notes, “much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgment, and thus a form of *acceptance*” (1977, 124). One of the challenges that current artistic and cultural practices are facing is thus navigating this space of possibilities and opposite pulls, where change is always threatened by incorporation, and emancipatory efforts by political neutralisation. This is why the formation of a post-colonial and anti-racist consciousness among Italian publics depends and will continue to depend on a receptive stance towards these practices and on the rejection of cosmetic forms of inclusion.



For more than three decades, Italy's methodologies of Blackness have denounced racial discrimination, resisted colonial structures of power and knowledge, and called for a serious rethinking of Italy's self-imagination. In this essay, I have traced their trajectory of emergence to show how they have acquired greater symbolic force and wider horizons of reception, despite institutional and cultural obstacles. In bringing these practices in conversation with postcoloniality, my aim has been to establish links and connections with colonial histories and with global struggles for racial justice, while highlighting the social and political specificities of the Italian context. The relevance of these practices is certainly artistic and cultural, but it also and most decisively historical. Commenting on the tragic history of the Caribbean and on the erasure of its collective memory in Western discourse, Édouard Glissant (1992, 64) wrote that the duty of the writer is to identify "a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future". He called this process "*a prophetic vision of the past*" (1992, 64). Ultimately, Italy's methodologies of Blackness encourage us to embrace this call as an opportunity to revisit the past, intervene in the present, and continue to work towards more equitable postcolonial futures.

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## **Section 2**

### Postcolonial Media Publics



# Cinema as Inquiry: On Art, Knowledge, and Justice

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**Abstract** This article considers how cinema is not only an apparatus or a means of representation and meaning-making. Instead, it is also a mode of inquiry that entails justice by creating, selecting, and combining audio and visual elements that reveal the workings of hierarchical power and envision new political forms of power and social relations.

**Keywords** Cinema. Research. Knowledge. Justice. Failure.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Cinema, as All Arts, is Re-Search. – 3 The Arts of Justice. – 4 The Ends of Knowledge.

## 1 Introduction

The year was 2011. I was at work on the documentary *War for Guam*, which was subsequently shown on over 500 US public television stations. Focused on the largest island of the Northern Marianas archipelago in the Pacific, the film used rarely seen archival images, contemporary *verité* footage, and testimonies of survivors and their descendants to tell a story generally unknown to Americans: how most Chamorros, the Indigenous people of Guam, remained loyal to the United States under a brutal Japanese occupation during World War II, later to be stripped of much of their ancestral lands by the US Navy. The film also explored the effects and consequences of this critical period on life in Guam. Though the US government eventual-

ly returned a fraction of the land, it more deeply integrated Guam into a global capitalist economy that revolved around US military contracts, military service, and Japanese tourism.

For a year during the editing process, I confronted conceptual and narrative obstacles I could not solve. One involved a section of the film regarding Chamorro responses to US Navy rule. I wanted to establish that the Chamorros had politically resisted the Naval government. Yet the archive did not contain any explicit images of protests or conflict. In addition, regardless of how I organized the footage, I failed to find a place for an interview clip that summed up the scholarly wisdom on the subject: that it was not until the 1970s that Chamorros began to resist Naval political control, particularly on issues related to land tenure, cultural assimilation, and governance.

Eventually, I realized what the problem was. The new ways that we related disparate archival and other materials suggested that Chamorro resistance had started from the moment the Navy touched land on Guam in (or close to) June 1898. This perspective materialized by montage produced another knowledge than what the contemporary interviewees offered. Signifying a longer duration of resistance shifted the colonial image of Chamorros as passive, affirmed that their political history was not simply a result of the US Civil Rights Movement, and enhanced understanding of how these past struggles informed present ones.

In tandem with other experiences, this process led me to a different way of approaching and thinking about what cinema is (or could be) and what filmmakers do. Cinema could be defined not only as an apparatus (de Lauretis, Heath 1980), dispositif to represent the world (Comolli 1980, 122), or means of communication, but also as a mode of inquiry with political and epistemological implications.<sup>1</sup> This understanding of cinema contrasts with hegemonic notions that view film texts as a site of beauty or individual feeling, film pedagogy as the acquisition of technical mastery, and filmmaking as the epistemological opposite of 'real' research. In this last paradigm, only scholars produce knowledge through the disciplined application of the scientific method (principally in the "hard" sciences) and generate conceptual thought.

To further elaborate the notion of cinema as inquiry, I relate seemingly disparate writers, filmmakers, visual artists, and other theorists in fields such as art-based research, anthropology, and visual arts, including John Akomfrah, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jean-Luc

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**1** For nearly two decades, I have taught the "Video as Inquiry" course at Columbia University. Intended for students without formal media production experience, I organize the class around three axes – conceptual, genealogical, and technical. In four months, nearly all students complete meaningful projects. Many become artists and integrate cinema as a research method.



Godard, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Tracey Moffatt. Through this process, I consider how cinematic practice is a form of research that contributes to the production of knowledge and the constitution of new subjects. Moreover, I inquire into how art practice can envision justice through imaginative associations that reconceptualize and recontextualize the relationship between ideas and images, particularly those that hegemonic visibility has buried, blocked, or (as filmmaker Raoul Peck would have it) “silenced” (*Exterminate All the Brutes*; Ponzanesi, Waller 2011). Lastly, I explore how artists of color, working within or in dialogue with decolonial, feminist, antiracist, queer, citizen media, and other forms of visual counterknowledge, enable “new seeing” (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 183).

## 2 Cinema, as All Arts, is Re-Search

The term research can be defined in many ways, accentuating different aspects and perspectives on the process. One definition that encompasses part of my argument is “systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to [...] reach new conclusions”.<sup>2</sup> That is, research is a creative and transformative mode of inquiry relying on specific “materials and sources”, which become method, medium, and mediation. Cinema as inquiry is then ‘re-searching’, or searching again, which includes temporal and spatial dimensions and the possibility of generating novel forms of knowledge.

Conceiving cinema and other visual arts in these terms, however, remains marginal. As arts educator, Elliot Eisner wrote, “the idea that art can be regarded as a form of knowledge does not have a secure history in contemporary philosophical thought” (2008, 3). Yet scholarly fields and practitioners have been theorizing and practicing visual art-making as a mode of inquiry for centuries, using a range of assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is produced.

One entry point is anthropology. From the late nineteenth century to the present, anthropologists have related visual media to knowing in several ways, viewing these as technologies to document and analyze cultural practices (or “patterns” in Ruth Benedict’s terms) and as a means to disseminate research (Ardévol Piera 1997, 126). A paradigmatic figure who experimented with all these modalities is Margaret Mead, who often with Gregory Bateson, created half a dozen films and thousands of photographs that sought to produce and circulate anthropological knowledge about the peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Equally important, the problematic manner anthropologists represented racialized and colonized people in

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oed.com>.

most of this work have led to other conceptualizations of cinema as inquiry. These included focusing on the privileged observer, collaborating with groups that have been the objects of anthropological knowledge, and supporting the work of Black, indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial artists.

In the last few decades, art-based researchers and educators have also argued that artistic practice can be research and can be helpful to research, including into subjectivity, trauma, and creativity. Tracing some of their ideas to Eisner, Julia Marshall and Kimberley D'Adamo argued,

the artmaking process is increasingly accepted in experimental forms of qualitative ethnographic, narrative, and phenomenological research in the social sciences, psychology, and education. Some artists and art educators are taking idea of using art practice in research a step further and claiming that art practice is research. (Marshall, D'Adamo 2011, 12)

For Marshall and D'Adamo, "artmaking is a form of inquiry" that produces new knowledge by mobilizing the scientific method of observation, collecting, identifying, and analyzing. These encompass "creative, non-verbal ways of understanding" (12), as well as embodied and subjective modes of knowing, such as emotion.

Although often disregarded by scholars outside of film and art history, visual artists have practiced art as research and have generated some of the most insightful theorizations for more than a century. An early example in cinema history is the English photographer Eadweard J. Muybridge (1830-1904), who deployed moving images to address gaps in knowledge about "animal locomotion". Muybridge's first and best-known research project emerged from a bet with the governor of California regarding "whether horses had all four feet off the ground when they ran at gallop" (Worth 1980, 16). (The answer: they do, though not when most people think.) Muybridge reached this conclusion by creating a series of 1877 photographs of horses in motion where he was could 'freeze' each moment.

In the twentieth century, artists have mainly moved away from positivist paradigms but continue to assert the relationship between image-making and knowledge. In 1956, Pablo Picasso stated,

I never do a painting like a work of art. It is always research, I'm always seeking and there is a logical connection throughout that search. This is why I number them [the works]. I number and date them. Maybe one day someone will thank me for it. (Lieberman 1956, 133)

Similar to contemporary art and film theorists, Picasso also defined research as an open-ended process beyond the artist's voli-

tion: “[w]hen one starts a painting, one never knows what will come out. When it’s finished, once still doesn’t know” (Malraux 1975, 260).

Whereas Picasso did not elaborate on how any particular painting generates knowledge, the ways his production can be considered research are evident in transition works such as the oil painting *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911–12). Condemned by contemporaries as “mad or monstrous” (Chave 1994), later considered a proto-Cubist ‘masterpiece’ by art critics, and increasingly the object of feminist and decolonial critique for its portrayal of women and “caricatured” African art (Chave 1994, 599), Picasso conducts research along various axes. In *Les Femmes d’Alger*, Picasso built on his inquiry into the work of artists Paul Gauguin, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Henri Matisse, alongside Iberian and African aesthetic practices (*Artsper Magazine* 2019; Blier 2019, 52). Besides interrogating the formal relationships between form, light, and color, he considered broader sociopolitical questions. These included the limits of European realist representation through a transcultural aesthetics, the ability of a two-dimensional medium to represent three-dimensional movement, the decentering of Western male subjectivity due to women’s growing autonomy, and the increased presence of African migrants, objects, and knowledge in Europe.

The research process and the way Picasso engages and organizes sources until he generates a new form (or conclusion) is evident in the placing of female figures and how the temporal practice of knowledge production appears spatially. Relying on narratives of Egypt as a cradle of world civilization, the first female body on the left appears as a relatively stable Egyptian ‘origin’, as if chiseled from rock. The visualization of two figures at the center emerges from Picasso’s knowledge of Iberian culture, which he places in the middle of an historical evolution. Lastly, the two images on the right spring from a later study and engagement with African art forms. Separated by a torn backdrop suggesting a break, one of Picasso’s conclusions appears to be that as a result of modernity, including the expansion of urban life and colonial migrations, female subjectivity, as the city, is devolving into a ‘savage’ form (Chave 1994).

Irrespective of Picasso’s politics, contemporary visual artist Fiona Campbell has productively developed his largely overlooked assertion of art as research. For Campbell,

[a]rt-making is really a research process, an exploration of a meeting of self and world through some form of material or substance. (Campbell 2019)

Campbell further argues that there are two ways to conceptualize how art as research:

art-making as a 'search through a problem space', a cognitivist view, as opposed to it being a 'phenomenon of emergence,' as phenomenologists and other such people consider it. (Campbell 2019)

The cognitivist perspective emphasizes research as related to a problem (to either finding or solving it). Yet, to the extent that both modes assume there is 'a problem', Campbell favors a paradigm of emergence, where the process is not anchored in a directed or sealed self. In her terms:

in creativity, the self is diffused into the emergent space, becomes part of something else that is not all about oneself, and allows something transformative to take place. (Campbell 2019)

This last conceptualization underscores that artistic knowledge production is embodied but not contained by individuals, an important distinction that I will return to.

Not long after Picasso's assertion, ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin proposed a different way to think of art as inquiry: *cinéma vérité*. Rouch and Morin embodied their method in *Chronique d'un Été*, a 1961 field-altering documentary that integrated analysis and research into the text. Structured around multiple questions, including 'are you happy?', the film explores the lives of a group of residents of Paris that occupy different racial, ethnic, gender, and class positions: Landry, a Black student from the Ivory Coast; Marceline, a French Jewish survivor of the Holocaust; Angelo, a French white worker at a Renault factory; and Marilù, a white Italian immigrant. Rouch and Morin, who appear on screen, seek to advance their research on the state of French society, including its tensions and hierarchies, by creating interventionist scenarios as knowledge experiments.

A thorny scene has Rouch instigating a conversation between Marceline, Landry, and Raymond (another Ivorian student) to investigate the effects of racism. Rouch probes Marceline on her racist views toward Blacks, which end with her laughing at the admission that although she is not attracted to Black men, they are "extraordinary" dancers. Morin shifts the conversation to the conflict in the Belgian Congo, asking participants how they see the Congolese anti-colonial movement and whether it "concerned" them. After various comments on the nature of colonial conditions and the conflict's violence, the film links Landry's observations about pan-African solidarity against European colonial rule to Marceline's remarks on Jewish solidarity against antisemitism. Rouch then probes Landry if he knows what the numbers tattooed by the Nazis on Marceline's arm mean and uses his unfamiliarity to enable Marceline to tell her story as a Holocaust survivor. Regarding the camera's presence as a cat-

alyst, the filmmakers aim to produce a ‘truth’ that can be fashioned only through the cinematic experience, even though, as this sequence suggests, not all truths are equally made visible.

However, Rouch and Morin’s understanding of cinematic inquiry as performative is only part of how cinema is (or can be) thought of as research. More critical to my conceptualization is what, in the 1920s, director Sergei Eisenstein called montage. In English, montage is usually translated as ‘editing’, yet essential dimensions of what Eisenstein (and other filmmakers) mean by montage are lost. Montage, for instance, is not simply adding one shot to another. In Eisenstein’s words:

It resembles a creation – rather than a sum of its parts – from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition *the result is qualitatively* distinguishable from each component element viewed separately. (Eisenstein 1969, 7-8)

In addition, Eisenstein defined montage as a general artistic method and used examples from film, theater, fiction, riddles, and painting:

[montage] is [...] a phenomenon invariably met with in all cases where we have to deal with juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomena, two objects. (4)

In this formulation, montage is an imaginative act that results in both something different (a new form) and something ‘more’ (a new knowledge).

Equally significant, Eisenstein was among the first to consider that the ultimate goal and power of montage goes beyond the text; it must activate spectators:

The task that confronts him [director] is to transform this image into a few basic *partial representations* which, in their combination and juxtaposition, shall evoke in the consciousness and feelings of the spectator, reader, or auditor, that same initial general image which originally hovered before the creative artist. (30-1)

Moreover, Eisenstein described filmmakers as “researchers” who, rather than linking images “in a chain” (as fellow theorist V. Pudovkin suggested) produce concepts from “the collision of two given factors” (37).

Building on the work of Eisenstein (and others), French director Jean-Luc Godard moves the concept of cinema as inquiry into more complex directions. According to Godard, montage encompasses two dimensions. The first is what happens within the uncut frame – the spatial relationships that are filmed, or montage “in space” (Godard 1956, 30). The second is what most theorists generally mean by mon-

tage and refers to the linking of two uncut sequences together, what he described as montage “in time”. For writer Steven Pressfield, this ability to connect is key to individual

talent: the innate power to discover the hidden connection between two things - images, ideas, words - that no one else has seen before, link them, and create for the world a third, utterly unique work. (Pressfield 2002, 8)

For Godard, however, this process is not about personal genius. Instead, following Merleau-Ponty, it requires choosing two or more things (events, facts, images), and combining them to lay bare “the link of the subject to the world, of the subject to others” (quoted in Witt 2000, 39). Whereas Eisenstein proposed a connection between the director’s mind and a viewer’s emotions, Godard emphasized that montage goes beyond this dyad. Even further, Godard understood montage as a practice capable of transforming subjectivity:

It [montage] was something that filmed not things, but the relationships between things. That is, people saw relationships; first of all, they saw a relationship with themselves. (Godard 1980, 175)<sup>3</sup>

In part due to the praxes of anticolonial, Black, feminist, indigenous, queer, and other social movements, the concept of cinema as inquiry is increasingly developed by multimodal artists of color. A significant figure is Trinh T. Minh-ha, who describes her practice as a “cinema as research and exploration” (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 177), focused on raising “the basic questions of existence as generated by a certain situation, a certain community, and applicable across cultural contexts” (178). Although Minh-ha’s work is in critical dialogue with canonical European and US production by men, her work is not primarily grounded in these cinematic histories and philosophical traditions. This different formation has considerable consequences: it shifts the knowing subject and her questions while reconceptualizing the relationship between subjectivity, embodiment, politics, time, and aesthetics.

If my films are different from other filmmakers’ works that I love, it’s mainly because of the way one engages basic notions such as, among others, those of the individual and the communal or of the external and the internal. These need not be binaries. (182)

In addition, Minh-ha’s concept of cinema as research encompasses more aspects of film practice than cinematic montage, including the

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**3** If not otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

invisibilized labor of cultivating an audience, which is often more challenging for women and people of color:

What happens in an encounter is an in-between that belongs to neither self nor other. And film itself is a form of research, albeit a research in every single step taken with the processes of film-making and building audiences: writing, shooting, editing, music composing, public debate, and more. These are all based on materials that do not pre-exists but come with heightened attention as body and mind go on the alert in the encounter. (182)

In other terms, “[a]s research, the film is still a groping in the dark, waiting for the form to manifest itself to the maker-cum-viewer” (183-4). For Minh-ha, a cinema of inquiry thus requires not only montage in space and montage in time, nor solely filmmakers and spectators. It also needs what I term ‘montage of publics’; that is, social encounters that multiply textual and extratextual links beyond the screen.

### 3 The Arts of Justice

The capacity of the visual arts to produce knowledge, reconstitute subjects, and relate spectators raises the question, “To what ends?” Art-based researchers such as Eisner believed that the arts’ main task is evoking emotion, which in turn could generate the needed “empathy that makes action possible” (Eisner 2008, 3). Not coincidentally, he uses the social impact of Picasso’s (1937) *Guernica* - an anti-war painting depicting the Nazi bombardment of a small Spanish town - to illustrate how viewers “are moved in ways that art makes” (Eisner 2008, 9).

For many modern artists, art’s contribution to politics is to challenge dominant epistemologies and assumptions about society. In Picasso’s well-known terms,

You have to wake people up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things. You’ve got to create images they won’t accept. (Mallarmé 1975, 260)

Godard would likely agree. However, he also suggests that in addition to destabilizing hegemonic knowledge, cinema as a mode of inquiry is linked to envisioning justice:

There’s a shot before, and another one after. And between the two, there’s a physical support, that’s cinema. We see a rich person and a poor person and there’s a rapprochement, and we say: it’s not

fair. Justice comes from rapprochement. And afterward, weighing it on the scales. The very idea of montage is the scales of justice. (Godard, Péretié [1987] 2022)

Cinema as inquiry then also encompass a complex process that invites spectators to act as collaborators in pursuing justice.

That cinema and other visual arts documents also make them an archive of past collective struggles and thwarted possibilities. In this sense, art may articulate a ‘prophesy’, and support structures of feeling and ways of being that are historically present but suppressed by the coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano 2007). In this regard, the potential for justice may be most significant in the hands of artists who mobilize montage as part of a range of countervisual practices to affirm “the right to look” in defiance of hegemonic visibility (Mirzoeff 2011, 473). These texts generate knowledge and facilitate social connection by inventing forms, activating memory, and creating or restoring the links between people and places that have been deleted, destroyed, or distorted by the apparatus of the visible, including the mass media, monuments, museums, and similar manifestations of hegemonic visibility.

A fruitful example of how montage can produce ‘just knowledge’ is the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1987). Basquiat hardly spoke on how his visual works generated knowledge. In fact, he avoided questions about his approach and the role of concepts in art-making. He also rarely used the word ‘justice’ to describe his practice. Yet his works contain extensive notes referencing sources, methods, and questions about justice. Through ‘montage in space’, Basquiat juxtaposed images, words, and symbols, to create a dense sensorial archive that revised, related, and recontextualized Black, Caribbean, indigenous, and other knowledges, affects, and memories. In the process, Basquiat produced critical and complex anti-colonial knowledge regarding the unjust politico-symbolic order that resulted from the conquest and settlement of the Americas and the extension of the European imperial project to Africa (Negrón-Muntaner with Ramírez 2017).

The above is evident in most of Basquiat’s visual texts. In some cases, Basquiat visualizes the problematics of justice as montage. In “Created Equal” (1984), an image of a black man’s head is framed by chains and placed below the phrase “WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS”, written three times, then followed by “1776” and the crossed-over phrase “ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL”. A similar impulse is present in *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari* (1982). In this work, Basquiat juxtaposes the image of a Black male figure carrying a box labeled “ROYAL SALT INC®” beside a sketchier image of a white man carrying a firearm, annotated with allusions to colonial and racial capitalism. Intervening the visual elements through collage, crossing over words, smudging, copying, improvising, and



making use of lines and arrows, among other strategies, Basquiat directs the reader's eye to consider alternative associations that disrupt knowledge that has become so naturalized that it appears as "empirical truths" (Farris Thompson 2011, 38).

A comparable intervention using montage in space and time is John Akomfrah's 2013 film *The Stuart Hall Project*, about the eponymous cultural theorist. Methodologically, Akomfrah employs montage to

connect apparently disconnected things, events, times and space into a kaleidoscopic image that mirrors Hall's theorisation of the black diasporic subject. (Harvey 2022, 84)

Specifically, Akomfrah relates the music of Miles Davis, Hall's television appearances and speeches; family photographs and home movies; footage and photos of everyday life, written text on screen, newsreels, and documentary photography on various geopolitical and cultural junctures. These include the post-World War II migration of Caribbean people to Britain, the Vietnam War, the Black Power Movement, the Hungarian uprising, the Cuban revolution, Paris 68, and the rise of Rock and Roll, among others.

As Basquiat, Akomfrah links diverse images to better understand the relationship of history and subjectivity and the workings of empire. He also suggests how through the nexus of empire, war, and transportation technologies, people have become conjoined in newly (inequitable) ways. This understanding is present in the many shots of trains, helicopters and airplanes that often accompany the connection of geography of distant and distinct places. Montage similarly allows Akomfrah to underscore and expand fundamental dimensions of Hall's thought. Just as film's associations are often unexpected, montage embodies Hall's observation that "the only interest in history that it is not yet finally wrapped up. Another history is always possible. Another turning is waiting to happen". Consistent with Hall's view that "every time, I have to teach it in a different way, or read it in a different way, and I see something that I have not seen before", montage is a way of seeing anew that is both method and politics.

Akomfrah thus deploys montage to investigate how and why expanding linkages between subjects enables just relations. In the process, Akomfrah opens a path for audiences to reconceptualize and to see the global nature of racism, displacement, and coloniality in their own lives and in the lives of others. Through signifying "affective proximity" (Akomfrah, Eshun 2017, 42), Akomfrah configures some of the ways that a montage of publics may lead to justice: he links himself to Hall, to others in the African diaspora and most of the world's peoples. And he invites viewers to do the same.

If Akomfrah's montage seeks justice by affiliation at a world scale, visual artist Tracey Moffatt considers how women take justice into

their hands every day. In Moffatt's 1987 experimental short, *Nice Coloured Girls: Captains*, three Australian indigenous women "cruise" through Kings Cross to pick up a "captain" (a drunken white man). The film's plot revolves around the young women's goal for the captain to pay for their night out without providing anything in return. The story, however, is not a realist drama. Instead, through the "counterpoint of sound, image, and printed text"<sup>4</sup>, the film connects the enduring coloniality of the present with the colonial rule of the past. Further, by producing counterknowledge regarding colonial histories, the film imagines justice as freedom from hierarchical power.

An instance of Moffatt's method involves the juxtaposition of a soundscape referencing a rural Australian environment, and the voice of a white actor reading passages from the diary of colonist Lieutenant William Bradley recalling the first settlement. The knowledge formed by this juxtaposition is amplified and anchored by the film's resolution: even though the 'coloured girls' engage in illegal acts such as stealing and taking advantage of the drunken captain, in contextualizing these transgressions in the broader history of white settler colonialism and colonial sexual exploitation, the narrative does not punish them. The narrative instead restores the women's status as autonomous beings and removes the requirement of being submissive to the (colonial) law as a prerequisite for being free of violence.

Moffatt's later film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990), also illustrates montage as justice but offers a different way forward. A partial remake of the 1955 feature drama *Jedda the Uncivilized*, *Night Cries* tells the story of an Aboriginal woman raised by a white family who dies after becoming involved with an Aboriginal man. Again, deploying a non-realist aesthetic, the film investigates the toll visited on a middle-aged indigenous woman (played by scholar Marcia Langton) taking care of her white adopted mother (Agnes Hardwick) in an isolated house in the desert.

An emblematic sequence to consider the relationship between montage and justice features the daughter consuming an apple and looking out barred windows while reading a brochure for the "South Molle Island Resort". After the mother gives up on trying to eat, the daughter feeds her at the same time she gazes at the family photographs, underscoring the ways visuality constructs a family narrative. The daughter then takes the mother to the outhouse and lights a cigarette in a surreal landscape that contains seemingly disparate objects: an animal skull, a wheelchair, and a bucket that she uses as a seat. By associating these objects, the scene exemplifies hu-

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<sup>4</sup> Women Make Movies. Catalogue, 2022. <https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/nice-colored-girls>.

man fragility and the unequal impact of race and gender hierarchies on care while refusing to segregate or oppose Aboriginal and settler forms of knowledge in a simple binary. As scholar Janet Watson has suggested, montage facilitates the creation of “intersections of imported artefact and local meaning are sites of ideological contestation” (Watson 2008). In this process, Moffatt’s work is a generative instance of art as research of emergence (Campbell 2019), where the outcome consists of questions about what constitutes justice rather than self-evident adjudication.

Art as inquiry then joins images, contexts, and spectators into the work of knowledge production or the ongoing collective project to “know together” (Monaco 1977, 164). This recalls Godard’s notion of montage as ethics and the pursuit of what he termed “con-science” fiction, which requires one

to be conscious of our selves as existential beings, to be aware of the environment in which we exist, is to have ‘conscience’ – an ethical sense of relationships and actions. (164)

Fittingly, the etymology of ‘conscience’ includes the notion of “a knowing of a thing together with another person”. It also encompasses a “sense of fairness or justice”.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 The Ends of Knowledge

Undoubtedly, cinema can be understood a mode of inquiry and a form of (and for) justice. Yet, it has limits. Although cinema can reveal, connect or reframe, not all can be created, found, or be connected. Moreover, the fact that pieces need to be associated inherently suggests a border, a loss, and an epistemic trauma that may not be known may or be can be addressed. In film theorist, Jacques Aumont’s terms,

Considered coldly [...] editing is nothing more than the reiterated production of these visual and mental traumas, showing us events cut off from their causes and consequences. (Aumont 2014, 11)

No less significant, montage relies on what is or can be rendered visible, which is “only a small part of the visible” (Comolli 1980, 141). Equally constraining is that relatively few people have access to the practices and technologies of image-making, which in turn have their limitations as the commodified product of colonial and capitalist power, which favor particular perspectives, geographies, and forms (re-

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/conscience>.

alism). Recognition of knowledge is also not a given; it depends on power relations mainly congealed in legal, media, and academic institutions, and the reproduction of narratives that sustain social and other hierarchies.

To the extent that most films and visual texts tell stories, inquiry entails symbolic and political violence. Although stories provide access to some forms of justice and truth, they contain or suppress other forms. This disjunction speaks to the core paradox of narrative: a story can provide insight only by selectivity and specificity, which cannot encompass it all. Knowledge production, including storytelling, is intrinsically related to power, which orders and serves desires and is always at risk of extracting the performers' and spectators' emotional and political investment. In this regard, no narrative is innocent, neutral, or individual.

Accordingly, the kind of knowledge or truth cinema may produce is provisional, and contested. For instance, *Chronique's* filmmakers (like Picasso) raised questions and engaged Black and women's archives. At the same time, both disallowed African knowledge and reinforced the hierarchy of European knowing subjects. Pursuing knowledge is also not necessarily the most capacious method of engaging with questions or the world's inequities. In Minh-ha's words,

We don't always have to operate with the knowing mode, approaching a subject as if we have to know all about it, and have that knowledge be unquestionably wrapped up for the spectator. A non-knowing mode, which is not ignorance, allows us to wander, wonder, and start afresh. This has been a constant in my work, while challenging history, his-story or Western historicization in its linear accounts of events has been a recurrent thread in my films. (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 187)

In addition, as writer Sven Lindqvist has compellingly argued, what prevents transformation may not necessarily be a lack of knowledge: "[w]hat is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions" (Lindqvist 1997, 1).

Speaking to the current digital juncture, Aumont states that the proliferation of images that cannot be connected curtails the ethics of montage and the method of cinema as inquiry (Aumont 2014, 63-5). Yet even if cinema as inquiry becomes the praxes for proportionally fewer artists and thinkers due to the web and the ascent of interactive media forms such as video games, it will remain a life-or-death endeavor for many. At a moment where knowledge is commodified, the volume of misinformation increases, and a handful of institutions control digital access, cinema as inquiry may be more urgent than ever. In this context, cinema's most deeply political dimension may rest in acknowledging that not all the world can be rendered visi-

ble. Therefore, cinematic practice must assume rather than deny the lack, use its knowledge of the gaps, and turn the traumas of the cut into more equitable and just forms of relation.

In other words, as I have learned in my films-in-progress *Paraíso* and *Valor y Cambio, the Movie*, what I have termed “decolonial digging” remains a fundamental pursuit. For Godard, digging is a permanent disposition of curiosity needed for cinema as inquiry. But I would suggest that digging can likewise be thought of as method to activate subjugated knowledge. This conceptualization is close to how Afro-Latino historian and theorist Arturo Alfonso Schomburg used the notion of “digging” in his classic essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925) where he linked the knowledge of Black history to present possibilities. Digging, however, is not just a method through which subjects can excavate buried knowledges. It is a way to claim justice as is the literal case of Patricio Guzmán’s 2010 film *Nostalgia for the Light*. In this text, Guzmán tells the stories of Chilean women who, with small shovels, dig in the vast desert of Atacama to find the bones of their loved ones who were murdered by the Chilean military. Associating the women’s search with the search for life in the universe, Guzmán’s digging is method, politics, and ethics.

Ultimately, approaching cinema as inquiry entails a commitment to dig, relate, and connect in ways we cannot completely understand and never master. Like every political and artistic practice, cinema is always unfinished and involves imperfect ‘attempts’ where filmmakers cannot help but fail. But sometimes, we fail beautifully, at least for a moment, and this alone is worth sharing.

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# Epistemic Decolonization of Migration: Digital Witnessing of Crisis and Borders in *For Sama*

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**Abstract** This chapter analyses how digital witnessing of migration in documentary auto-ethnography contributes towards epistemic decolonization. I focus on *For Sama* (Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019) as a case study, a letter-film that memorializes key events in al-Kateab's everyday life during the Syrian Civil War that shaped her decision to migrate to Europe. By considering the relation between documentary, citizen media, and decoloniality, I argue that digital witnessing in *For Sama* provides affective access to migration motivations that challenges their reductionist categorization and pluralizes audience understanding of 'crisis' and 'borders'.

**Keywords** Migrant voices. Decoloniality of knowledge. Documentary auto-ethnography. Crisis ordinariness. Borderscape.

**Summary** 1 Digital Inclusion of Migrant Voices. – 2 Towards Decoloniality of Knowledge. – 3 Auto-ethnography of War and Migration. – 4 Navigating Borderscapes of Migration. – 5 Digital Witnessing and Epistolarity. – 6 Conclusion.

## 1 Digital Inclusion of Migrant Voices

Images of border-crossing, both of Europe's terrestrial and maritime borders, regularly feature in digital representation of migration. Since the discourse of 'crisis' became central to the issue of migration to Europe, external European borders became sites of anxiety over their ability to regulate migrant movement, which has resulted in an ongoing debate on how securitization of borders should be enacted (Lynes et al. 2020). The so-called 'migration crisis', from a

Eurocentric point of view, can be understood as a crisis of migration management and border control. Such a construal of the crisis of European borders, which I will refer to as the border-crisis discourse, reinforces two contentious ideas. The first is that the ‘crisis’ at stake is an exceptional situation that disturbs an otherwise stable state of events, the danger of which requires an emergency response (New Keywords Collective 2016). The second pertains to an understanding of ‘borders’ as strictly spatial entities, which function to protect Europe from illegalized border-crossings (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). Digital mediations of the border-crisis discourse, as well as of other migration-related discourses, have rendered migrants hyper visible to European publics. Additionally, professional media outlets commonly remediate digital testimonies of migrants turned citizen journalists in relaying information to European audiences.

Considering the hypervisibility of migrants and the centrality of their testimonies in digital media, it is worth turning to the question of migrant inclusion in the production of knowledge of migration, in particular in relation to the digital witnessing of conflict. Digital witnessing has been defined by Lillie Chouliaraki (2015, 1363) as the use of mobile media, including the practice of recording, uploading, and sharing, to incite “moral engagement with distant suffering”. When it comes to the inclusion of migrant voices in the European mediascape, it has been argued that both institutional and grassroots initiatives implement a conditionality in the migrants’ right to speak instead of enabling them “to set the parameters of the conversation” (Georgiou 2018, 54). Moreover, digital witnessing in news media is commonly based on the re-contextualization of migrant testimonies as events worthy of European attention, thereby engaging in selective humanization that reproduces “global hierarchies of place and human life” (Chouliaraki 2015, 1375). An example of this is how the border-crisis discourse represents illegalized border-crossing as a crisis-event worthy of concerns over the protection of national borders, thereby creating a hierarchy between migrants’ lives and those of European citizens.

Forms of digital witnessing of migration that are based on conditional inclusion of migrant voices and misrecognition of migrants’ historicity partake in the logic of coloniality of migration by reinforcing coloniality of knowledge, which are together invested in regulating knowledge production in a manner that perpetuates hierarchies of difference in Europe (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Mignolo 2018). Coloniality is in this regard understood as an investment in the creation of hierarchies of difference used to justify exploitation and dehumanization of certain peoples in post-colonial contexts. Decoloniality, in contrast,

[R]efers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and

that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world. (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 10)

In this chapter, I am interested in how citizen media can avoid the potential pitfalls of the above-discussed instances of digital media, and how they can thereby delink from coloniality. How do citizen media that deal with the position of (prospective) migrants narrate the experience of crisis and borders? What forms of digital witnessing of migration do they afford? How do they advance epistemic decolonization of migration in digital media? In addressing these questions, this chapter contributes to an understanding of the relationship between coloniality, migration and citizen media in post-colonial Europe, and how cinematic practices can contribute towards decoloniality of migration. I thereby also join the discussion pursued by Andrea Segre's contribution to this volume on how cinema can intervene in migration discourses and policies.

As the recurring focus of the border-crisis discourse has been on migrants who flee the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), I focus on *For Sama* (2019) as a case study, a documentary auto-ethnography directed by Waad al-Kateab in collaboration with Edward Watts. The documentary, entirely shot and narrated by Waad, memorializes key events in hers, her partner Hamza's, and their daughter Sama's everyday life during the siege of Aleppo in 2016. In this chapter, I address the digital witnessing of war and migration in *For Sama* and its potential contribution to epistemic decolonization of migration. First, I elaborate on the relationship between witnessing, citizen media, cinema, and decoloniality. Second, I discuss how *For Sama* shifts the discussion from exceptional crises of migration in Europe towards crisis of ordinary life (Berlant 2011) as it is lived by those who contemplate migration, as well as from external territorial European borders to borderscapes (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) that include internal and temporal borders that shape migrant subjectivities. Moreover, I discuss the relation between the affective dimension of digital witnessing afforded by *For Sama*'s epistolary format, which marks spectatorship both in terms of intimacy and distance, and its contribution towards epistemic decolonization of migration. I argue that *For Sama* affords heterogeneity of knowledge of migration through digital witnessing that pluralizes our understanding of 'crisis' and 'borders', as well as challenges reductionist categorizations of migration motivations.

## 2 Towards Decoloniality of Knowledge

In examining the representation of migrant voices in digital Europe, Myria Georgiou (2018) differentiates between their inclusion in institutional and grassroots initiatives. She finds that institutional initiatives regulate the inclusion of migrant voices to further institutional aims and fit the interests and imaginaries of European audiences, whereby migrants are represented as non-political subjects worthy of humanitarian help. Grassroots initiatives, on the other hand, try to advance a politics of solidarity and equality. They feature migrants who hold certain symbolic power in European public spaces and represent them as political agents who have rights or demand rights. Both types of initiative, as Georgiou (2018) argues, are subject to symbolic power and reinforce certain aspects of 'symbolic bordering' (Chouliaraki 2017), a form of sovereign power that operates through the mediated public sphere with the intention to regulate the norms of humanity, recognition, and voice. Symbolic bordering can be regarded as co-constitutive of the European border regime, due to their shared aim of regulating migrant inclusion into European public spheres. The border-crisis discourse, for example, enacts symbolic bordering by defining humanity in Eurocentric terms and thereby misrecognizes what is at stake in migrants' voices, which results in a lack of understanding of their historicity. Participatory digital media perpetuate symbolic bordering by implementing a conditionality in the migrants' right to speak, and in this way regulate forms of digital witnessing of migration (Georgiou 2018).

The field of media witnessing can be approached as consisting of 'eyewitnesses', 'mediators', and 'audience' (Ashuri, Pinchevski 2009). The eyewitnesses are in the direct proximity to the event, mediators enable the media production of the event at stake, and audiences are engaged by mediated perspectives in diverse ways. Such an account of witnessing highlights its political dimension by presenting it as a site of struggle instead of privilege, in which a witness must obtain agency, attain voice, and compel audiences to take notice. Given the intertwining of professional and citizen journalism in news media reporting, and the multiplicity of actors who are filming, the field of witnessing becomes a site of struggle where different actors "vie for visibility" (Chouliaraki 2015, 1372). This is noticeable when it comes to the remediation of migrant testimonies in digital media. Namely, in analysing different forms of digital witnessing in conflict zones that rely on the remediation of digital testimonies, including those of (prospective) migrants, Chouliaraki (2015) finds them to be primarily dedicated to managing doubts over authenticity of the image by re-contextualizing the footage as an event worthy of European attention. Namely, digital news media attempt to establish authenticity by aligning the emotional potential of the

mediated event with Western sensibilities, thereby making it morally relevant for Western publics.

Forms of digital witnessing that normalize categorization, classification, and illegalization of migration, as well misappropriate, marginalize, and misrecognize migrant voices can be regarded as practices that reinforce coloniality of knowledge. For example, border-crisis discourse and its focus on migration management have placed the opposition between ‘forced’ or political and ‘voluntary’ or economic migration under a magnifying glass. However, instead of being opposed to each other, so-called political and economic motivations for migration should rather be perceived as connected, which is known as the ‘asylum-migration nexus’ (Castles 2006). Namely, the belief that political and economic reasons for migration are easily separable ignores the diverse contexts in which migration decisions are made. Such strict analytical and binary categorization overlooks many motivations to migrate and poses illegalization as a continuous threat (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). In turn, the processes of categorization, classification, and illegalization of migrants make migration and population governable (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014). Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018) conceptualizes the governing logic underlying these processes as one of ‘coloniality of migration’, which works to reinforce hierarchies of difference at the basis of Europe’s violent, and often deadly, bordering techniques. A crucial aspect of this logic is coloniality of knowledge: a subject/object relation, whereby only European cultures can have ‘subjects’ as bearers of knowledge, while other cultures, positioned as inferior to European cultures, can only be ‘objects’ of knowledge (Quijano 2007). The position of a ‘subject’, then, can be understood as “a field of struggle and a site that must be controlled and dominated” so as to ensure “the coherence of a given worldview” (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 19), which echoes the conceptualization of witnessing as a site of political struggle.

When migrants are separated from the mediation process in the field of media witnessing, they cannot partake in the process of creating collective meanings about their own experiences and the issues that directly concern them, which results in their epistemic marginalization in Europe and a lack of hermeneutical resources regarding experiences of migration. The hermeneutical gap created by symbolic borders can be repaired through epistemic decolonization of knowledge of migration, which is an ongoing process through which the subject/object relation of knowledge production is liberated, in turn allowing for the production of heterogeneity of knowledge of migration (Quijano 2007). ‘Delinking’ from hegemonic forms of knowledge can change the terms of the conversation about migration to Europe and open the possibility of decolonial subjectivity (Mignolo 2018). Documentary auto-ethnography partakes in the process of epistemic decolonization by enabling eyewitnesses to contribute

to the production of knowledge of migration by becoming mediators of their own testimonies, creating and narrativizing visual registers of migration experiences, and by setting their own terms of conversation about it. Turning towards migrants' mediated knowledge acknowledges them as contributors to hermeneutical resources that shape European publics and brings to the fore their own manner of self-narration, as opposed to the social type imposed on them by normative hermeneutical resources (Hänel 2021).

Such a relationship between citizen media, cinema, and decoloniality, has already been theorized by Sandra Ponzanesi (2016). As she writes, postcolonial cinemas, when acting as a "platform for subaltern marginalities", can afford migrants participation in the shaping of public and political life: the use of media by members of marginalized communities "to critique and contest social structures and shape political realities" is where postcolonial cinemas and citizen media intersect (Ponzanesi 2016, 43). Importantly, cinema's particular contribution to decoloniality lies in its aesthetic ability to provide "alternative visual registers" (44). The following section will thus unpack how *For Sama* contributes towards epistemic decolonization and the shaping of postcolonial publics via cinematic means.

In *For Sama*, Waad traces hers and Hamza's commitment to their respective parts in the revolution as a citizen journalist and a doctor despite the imminent danger to their lives, the starting of their shared family life and birth of their daughter Sama, as well as how they grapple with the moral dilemma of whether to stay in Aleppo or leave and migrate to the United Kingdom. By utilizing voice-over narration, Waad creates an audio-visual letter for Sama that tries to explain the choices her parents made. Prior to making the film, Waad was employed as citizen journalist for Channel 4, a British public service television network, where her footage featured in a program titled *Inside Aleppo*. The program offered reports about daily life in besieged Aleppo, which were remediated to fit an impersonal perspective narrated by a non-diegetic voice-over that mainly expressed humanitarian concerns for victims of war. *For Sama*, on the other hand, while utilizing some of the same footage that featured in *Inside Aleppo*, tells a personal story from Waad's perspective. The documentary thereby exceeds citizen journalism and takes the form of auto-ethnography about the reality of Syrian citizens seeking safety in Europe, which makes it an instance of citizen media (Baker, Blaagaard 2016).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Channel 4 produced the film, alongside other international public broadcasters. This entails that *For Sama* can simultaneously afford the expression of the al-Kateab's voice on her own terms and fulfill certain institutional aims of the funding organizations or other collaborators involved in the project.

### 3 Auto-ethnography of War and Migration

'Crisis' rhetoric often presents border-crossings as emergency situations in relation to migration management and border control. New Keywords Collective (2016) has argued against seeing illegalized migration movement as resulting in exceptional crises at European borders by pointing out that, considering a border regime that forecloses mobility for many, large-scale illegalized migration to Europe is a predictable and inevitable event. They criticize the exceptionality that the term 'crisis' casts on migration, which they oppose to the temporal durability of the issue that reveals the border regime itself as being in permanent crisis. Instead of targeting the long-existing issues of the European border regime, in particular the violence and death intrinsic to its exclusionary practices, the 'crisis' rhetoric is commonly used for perpetuating the very conditions that have created the emergency situations at stake. In this way, not only is the current European border regime structured around the repression of migration, but the continuous equation of 'crisis' with migration further legitimizes and reinforces such a regime.

As many migration theorists have already argued, this state of affairs points towards a crisis of state power over transnational human mobility, which, despite the regulative efforts of the European border regime, remains incorrigible and continues to contest Europe's bordering practices (De Genova 2017). It also points towards the multiplicity of crises that those practices enact for migrants, including mistreatment, marginalization, and death, which the Eurocentric focus on migration management tends to normalize (Lynes et al. 2020). Of importance to this chapter is how the discourse of exceptional crises of border-crossing distracts from the regime of structural and ongoing disruptions to everyday life, or 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 2011), which may prompt migration in the first place. Lauren Berlant's theorization of the relationship between ordinary life and experiences of crisis comes from an understanding that

[C]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness, but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming. (Berlant 2011, 10)

It is in this manner that I will approach *For Sama's* insights into how ordinary lives are shaped by crises, and how people develop survival tactics to find ways to continue living in such situations.

The documentary's narration of border-crossing reveals how the family's everyday life is shaped by an ongoing crisis induced by the civil war. The crisis ordinariness in which they live has nothing to do with exceptional disturbances to an otherwise stable state of events, but rather with an experience of the 'impasse', a stretch of the his-

torical present that does not have a clear temporal genre of its own but rather points to the struggle to adjust to the everyday life shaped by structural and ongoing crises (Berlant 2011). It as an experience of the present as a

[M]iddle without boundaries, edges, shape, [...] where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurance of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. (Berlant 2011, 200)

Affectively, the impasse involves the experiences of being suspended in time, stuck, unable to progress towards a future, yet continuously trying to adapt to the uncertainties of everyday life. Let us take a closer look at how the film reveals the impasse as experienced amid ongoing violence and death.

When the protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad in early 2011 were met with repression and censorship, many citizens started documenting how the uprising escalated into a civil war, with the hope of providing audio-visual evidence for the violence regime forces were enacting against citizens (Della Ratta 2018). Among them was Waad, who also took on the role of a citizen journalist. As she explains in the film: “The regime denied protests were happening. Filming on mobile phones was the only way to show the world we were fighting for our freedom”. Her personal archive from this period includes images of mass protests, showing how citizens organized themselves to demonstrate against the regime, as well as how pro-regime security forces reacted with violence against the protesters.

One of the earliest moments included in the film that shows the terror faced by Syrian citizens occurs in January of 2013. In the scene, Waad arrives at the city square, where bodies of deceased civilians are displayed after being taken out of a river, where they were initially drowned. With her camera in hand, she searches for those who were handcuffed, visibly tortured, and executed with a bullet to the head, wanting to document the massacre. Waad is not only interested in relaying such information, but also the experience of living in and with violence. As she comes closer to the deceased civilians, she attends to their mutilated bodies, offering an uncensored and unregulated account of the massacre.

While this massacre stands out as a traumatic event in Waad’s recounting of the civil war, it is unfortunately the first one of many to come. Waad and Hamza spend most of their time in an improvised hospital set up to help the victims of war, thereby becoming eyewitnesses to the outcomes of multiple air strikes, cluster bombs, tank shelling and chlorine gas attacks in Eastern Aleppo. Multiple scenes in the documentary reveal the extent to which everyday life in Aleppo has been disrupted. For example, after one of the air strikes in Sep-



tember 2016, two young boys enter the hospital with a lifeless body of their brother, Mohammad, and are soon followed by their mother who is in search of her children. Waad's camera attends to the boy's lifeless body, to the shock and grief of his brothers, and the protective embrace of his mother as she envelops his body in a motherly caring gesture. In staying with the one who has died and with those who grieve his death, *For Sama* shows the terror of living in Aleppo that seems impossible to evade.

As traumatic events become nearly everyday occurrences, the repetitive immersion in violence and suffering reveals the experience of an ongoing crisis as one of the impasse, in which the present is suspended due to the overwhelming impact of the trauma. Following Berlant (2011), we can understand the crisis ordinariness portrayed in *For Sama* as incited by traumatic events in which one encounters violence and death. Berlant (2011, 81) argues against a common understanding of traumatic events as resulting in the detachment of a subject from the historical moment, and instead proposes to conceive of the affective structure of trauma as involving a "sense of being saturated by it in the present", "a sense of being frozen out of the future (now defined by the past)", and "because ordinary life does go on, a sense of the present that makes no sense with the rest of it". The impasse experienced amidst such a crisis ordinariness is the impasse "when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust" (200). Instead of perceiving the traumatic events as detached from the ordinary, one must rather pay attention to how they become diffused through the ordinary, which *For Sama* as a testimony of living amid violence and death enables.

At the centre of Waad's personal experience is the inability to conceive of a future in Aleppo, as the hopes for the revolution are continuously shattered by the regime's oppression. With her camera, she traces the adjustments her family makes to living in an ongoing crisis, her struggle to cope with the impasse, and the suspension of their life in a civil war with no end in sight. By revealing how crisis ordinariness is shaped by traumatic events that diffuse through everyday life, *For Sama* offers insight into the affective and temporal dimensions of the lived experiences of crisis, which in turn not only challenges the Eurocentric rhetoric of 'migration-crisis' but pluralizes our understanding of 'crisis' in relation to migration. In turn, crisis is revealed as a recurring event diffused through the ordinary that incites contemplations of border-crossing, instead of as an exceptional disturbance to the European border regime.

## 4 Navigating Borderscapes of Migration

In this section, I move towards the spatial and temporal bordering practices that underlie the above-discussed experiences of the *impasse*. Let us first critically interrogate the understanding of ‘borders’ in relation to crisis-management that is reinforced by the border-crisis discourse. Of relevance here is the personification of crisis as a ‘disease’ carried by the migrant:

The very terms ‘migrant crisis’ and ‘refugee crisis’ tend to personalize ‘crisis’ and relocate it in the body and person of the figurative migrant/refugee, as if s/he is the carrier of a disease called ‘crisis’, and thus carries the contagion of ‘crisis’ wherever s/he may go. (New Keywords Collective 2016, 20)

Crisis-as-disease discourse enacts victimhood as a structure of communication (Chouliaraki 2021) by personifying Europe into a victim of such a ‘disease’. The focus of these anxieties are migratory border-crossings, particularly those of nation states, which are perceived as protective barriers to the entry of the ‘disease.’

The understanding of nation-state borders as sites where the security of citizens and citizenship against illegalized migrants supposedly takes place, is reinforced through spectacles of law enforcement. De Genova (2013, 1181) calls these ‘border spectacles’, which are spectacles of “enforcement at ‘the’ border, whereby migrant ‘illegality’ is rendered spectacularly visible”. A common enactment of a border spectacle includes images which depict the patrolling and policing of geographical borders, as well as detentions, raids, and deportations. Such images work to render ‘illegality’ visible, and to enact and perform borders as sites where ‘illegal’ migrants are excluded. Importantly, this performativity of border spectacles is effective in naturalizing borders as the nation states’ physical frontiers and spaces for regulation of migration through exclusion. Rosaria Ruffini’s contribution to this volume also taps into the performative character of the border by attending to the creative practices that subvert that space of performativity into one of interaction and solidarity.

Moreover, the equation of borders with those of nation states undermines the multiplicity and heterogeneity of borders that shape European spaces and subjectivities, not only those of illegalized migrants but also of legally recognized citizens. In response, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) propose the term ‘borderscape’ as one that can account for a dynamic understanding of the border. Rather than being static territorial lines, borderscapes comprise of a multiplicity of spatial and temporal borders. The spatiality of the borderscape includes external borders, which delineate a nation-state, as well as internal borders, which refer to unofficially instat-

ed borders within nation states that work to differentiate between the local population. Internal borders usually manifest in the form of neighbourhoods that appear as spatially segregated from the rest of the city's population. This process of 'internal exclusion' results in a creation of a local population that is neither inside nor outside of society (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). The focus on the temporality of the borderscape is productive in illuminating how time can be experienced as bordered, as opposed to linear, by migrants and citizens alike. While there are many manifestations of temporal borders, what they have in common are

[E]xperiences of passing through and living in borderscapes where the compression, elongation, and partitioning of time exerts effects of control, filtering, and selectivity. (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013, 132)

For example, time spent in detention centres can be perceived as temporal holding, and those with temporary visas and residence permits can measure time in relation to the temporal validity of their documents.

For Waad, Hamza, and Sama, the internal borders within Syria have multiplied during the civil war as the battle for Aleppo progressed. Two internal borders have significant impact on their lives: one is the border of Eastern Aleppo, held by the rebel forces, which separates it from the regime-governed territories of Aleppo; the second one is the border between the hospital, where they spend most of their time, and the world outside it. The potential border-crossing of Syria's national borders, and eventually across European borders, are ideas that are mediated in their minds for a long time as they negotiate the internal borders of their everyday movements. In this sense, as contemplations of migration, these borders proliferate into temporal borders, representing potential moments in time when the borders within Syria could close in on them and migration could emerge as the only possible survival method. To see border-crossing as a temporal border denotes its perceived power to enact temporal differentiation into their lives: the lives before the border-crossing as the fight for the revolution, and the life afterwards as an acknowledgment that the uprising has been suppressed, at least temporarily. Nonetheless, despite these multiple borders, the digital witnessing enabled by Waad's citizen journalism continuously transgress the spatial and temporal divide between her and Europe by connecting her with international audiences. The borderscapes of migration, in Waad's case, should be seen as permeated by the labour she performs through the collaboration with Channel 4, which partially transforms her into a virtual migrant (Aneesh 2006).

Many of the adjustments to living in the impasse of war appear as survival tactics enacted with the hope to make the ordinary life possible again. Such adjustments to crisis ordinariness offer tempo-

rary moments of feeling unstuck, with a sense that a future in Syria might be possible. With the daily attacks on civilians by the regime and its allies, which also target hospitals, the frontier that the hospital space represents, and which has brought some sense of security to Waad's family, begins to be disturbed. Crossing the border of the hospital into the outside world becomes a transgression of a border that separates a situation of crisis from one of normalcy, a manner of believing that everyday life can continue despite the terror: "I just need to see people alive. To try to live a normal life is to stand against the regime". The commitment and persistence to live a normal life – a demand for normalcy – is what she finds revolutionary in itself. Waad's camera films how everyday life unfolds on the streets of Aleppo: some people are playing chess, others are painting a building with colourful shades, while the children are bathing in bomb craters and playing in the ruins of a bus hit by a cluster bomb.

The strongest persistence against the impasse has been Waad's and Hamza's decision to start a family. Surrounded by a small group of friends in an apartment where windows are covered with sandbags for protection, a small wedding ceremony is performed. In elegant wedding clothes, they walk hand in hand, smiling and laughing, as Waad narrates: "The sound of our songs was louder than the bombs falling outside". Soon after, she announces her pregnancy. In a scene in which she gives birth to Sama, we see her overwhelmed by emotions: "When I saw you... I remembered all we had suffered and all the people we lost. Yet you gave me hope to start anew". Past, present, and future are clearly delineated in this scene, with Sama's birth differentiating the past, now marked by loss, from the future, which could hold a different life.

Despite their efforts against the multiplication of borders in their lives, the regime forces are making steady progress in expanding their control over Eastern Aleppo. With hospitals as the main target, it is not long until Hamza's hospital is the last one still operating, with hundreds of wounded people being brought in daily. Waad's camera focuses on two parents who are carrying the body of their just deceased child. Like many other scenes filmed inside the hospital, Waad is drawn towards families destroyed by the war, towards parents, especially mothers, and their children. The mother whom she films in this scene, which is also the last such scene in the film, is in shock, crying loudly over the death of her child who was killed in an airstrike as they tried to leave the besieged district. Despite having witnessed similar traumatic events before, this one feels different. "I am not sure I can handle it", says Waad. With her camera, she moves around the hospital rooms full of bodies of dead children and lingers on the puddles of blood that surround her. In that moment, the deaths she witnessed and the losses she suffered become overwhelming: "Even when I close my eyes, I see the colour red. Blood

everywhere. On walls, floors, our clothes. Sometimes we cry blood". The overwhelming impact of death as a recurring event in her everyday life forces Waad to choose migration as a survival tactic out of the increasingly oppressive crisis ordinariness. Namely, as the regime forces come to surround the hospital, the paths she can take to save Sama have narrowed to two by now. They could leave her, as Sama's chances for survival might be higher if the regime forces do not know who her parents are. Or, as the regime and its allies have promised, they could be evacuated from Aleppo, and their lives will be spared. Under such circumstances, they decide to accept this alternative.

With this, they cross the temporal border that the decision to migrate represented. Border-crossing carries distinct kinds of weight for each migrant. For Waad and Hamza, leaving Aleppo entails leaving the roles they performed in the revolution. This does not mean they will not enact their revolutionary ideas elsewhere, but it means, at least, a temporary defeat, after having tried for years to resist the regime's oppression in Syria. From this perspective, *For Sama* can be understood as narrating the larger borderscape of the family's migration decision. Even though the crossing of national borders does not feature in *For Sama*, the film nonetheless represents the family's navigation of this borderscape's internal and temporal borders and their lengthy process of contemplating border-crossing, first from Syria to Turkey, and then to Europe. Importantly, Waad's connection to Channel 4 as a citizen journalist has ensured a safe and legalized border-crossing to England, where they now reside. In this, *For Sama* offers insight into the affective experience of borders that shape migrant subjectivities and into the efforts against their proliferation, which in turn not only challenges the Eurocentric reiteration of borders as nation states' protective barriers but reveals a multiplicity of internal and temporal borders that migrants must navigate prior to border-crossing.

Moreover, as these insights are provided by witnessing everyday life through the director's perspective, it is worth briefly turning to the role of character engagement in epistemic decolonization. In the director's statement about *For Sama*, Waad reflects on the process of self-narrativization: "Waad the mother, Waad the activist, Waad the citizen journalist and Waad the director. All those people both embodied and led the story". The roles she identifies here as important for her life are the roles she embodied during her life in Aleppo, as well as the roles she had to negotiate and express in the process of telling her own story to reveal the complexity of her reality. While her family has undoubtedly been forcibly displaced, the migration motivations that informed their decision to leave Syria are multiple and cannot be characterized as either political or economic, which the logic of coloniality of migration imposes. Therefore, considering *For Sama's* access to crisis ordinariness permeated by spatial and tem-

poral borders, character engagement affords insights into the nexus of migration motivations, which in turn reveals the strict binary logic of migration categorization and classification in Europe as reinforcing coloniality of migration.

## 5 Digital Witnessing and Epistolarity

Crisis ordinariness and borderscapes of migration have been communicated in *For Sama* via an epistolary format, which has often been used among filmmakers reflecting on questions particular to migration (Naficy 2001). No matter the format of the epistle, be it a written letter, a phone call, or a video message, it necessarily involves intersubjective contact and communication, or at least the desire for one. Following Hamid Naficy's analysis of different epistolary formats in cinema, the one that emerges as relevant for the current analysis is a 'letter-film':

Unlike exilic film-letters that inscribe letters, telephones, and other epistolary media, as well as acts of writing and reading letters and conversing on the telephone, letter-films are themselves epistles that do not necessarily inscribe epistolary media or epistolary production or reception. (Naficy 2001, 141)

As *For Sama* takes the form of a letter to the director's daughter but does not involve epistolary production or reception within the film, it can best be described as a letter-film. Waad addresses the letter-film to Sama to make herself, and her decisions before and after having given birth, intelligible to her daughter.

*For Sama* utilizes epistolarity for self-exploration and self-narrativization as much as for intersubjective contact and communication. In the attempt to make oneself intelligible to an other, the creation of an epistle poses the relationship between the personal and the social as a question: a form of reciprocity is desired, but not guaranteed (Naficy 2001). Building on Naficy's theorization of the epistolary film as necessarily implying the desire for intersubjective contact and communication, Laura Rascaroli (2017, 147) stresses how distance "is at once emphasized and overcome by the intimate address". Both Naficy and Rascaroli highlight the desire for reciprocity as an essential aspect of the epistolary format, which inherently acknowledges the distance - temporal, spatial, or both - that exists between the one who is writing the letter and its intended receiver. While Waad's activism may have started from the need to provide visual evidence against regime's oppression, it transformed into the act of filming her everyday experiences, some of which are purely personal, such as her and Hamza's wedding, announcement of pregnancy, and the birth of

Sama. Presented in a letter-film, these recordings are recontextualized to memorialize events that have had, and will continue to have, impact on Sama, who is currently unaware of them. *For Sama*, therefore, attempts to bridge an anticipated temporal distance between Waad and Sama, as well as the spatial distance between England, where they both reside, and Syria, where the footage takes places.

As epistolary exchanges include acts of reaching out without a guaranteed return of the gesture, Rascaroli further reflects how

[L]etters always weave a fragile textuality, one dependent on the next epistle being written, reaching its addressee, and being read and understood; the whole text is perched on the continuation of a dialogue that is deeply contingent and subject to a range of material and emotional conditions. (Rascaroli 2017, 155)

Reciprocity is at the core of the film, yet it is sought from Sama as a diegetic character and not directly from the spectator: “Sama, will you remember Aleppo? Will you blame me for staying here? Or blame me for leaving now?” Reciprocity is thus directly desired from the one within the film’s diegesis, while the viewer is allowed access to the letter’s intimate address. The decision to invite digital witnessing through a fragile textuality expressive of care, protection, and companionship results in the transformation of the spectator into an intimate witness of everyday life.

In the field of witnessing of migration that is bounded by symbolic borders, it is important to observe that *For Sama* takes the form of narration that does not seek to explain or persuade but offers an opportunity to witness intimate spaces of everyday life, whereby the spectator is not directly addressed, but included in an address expressive of the desire for understanding and reciprocity. Digital witnessing in *For Sama* is thus primarily affective, rather than, for example, persuasive. The epistemic relation between the director’s mediated testimony and the spectator is marked both by distance and by a sense of intimacy and desired reciprocity. Such cinematic choices shape digital witnessing in *For Sama* as one that welcomes, and not imposes, a heterogeneity of knowledge of migration. As its content and mode of storytelling delink from hegemonic migration discourses, the documentary introduces decoloniality of migration as an option, and not an imperative. The ability to see certain discourses and perspectives as otherwise, as plausibly different instead of as essential, is what Walter Mignolo (2018) finds to be a necessary dimension of decoloniality. The cinematic engagement afforded by the film’s epistolary auto-ethnographic format can thus be approached as a crucial aesthetic aspect of the film’s contribution towards epistemic decolonization.

## 6 Conclusion

By focusing on *For Sama* as a case study, this chapter offered an analysis of how digital witnessing – the engagement with lived experiences of violence and death in conflict zones through mobile media – affords access to the affective experience of war and migration. My analysis revealed the digital witnessing of Waad’s personal footage in the form of auto-ethnography as characterized by the engagement with the crisis of ordinary life, survival tactics against living in the impasse, multiplicity of spatial and temporal borders, personal and political needs to memorialize everyday life, and the desire for understanding and reciprocity. In enabling Waad as an eyewitness in a conflict zone to access the process of mediation and address audiences on her own terms, I argued that *For Sama* contributes to the process of epistemic decolonization of migration. My analysis showed how cinematic means of documentary auto-ethnography invite engagement with the affective experiences of crisis-ordinariness and borderscapes of migration in a manner that invites heterogeneity of knowledge. In pluralizing audience understanding of ‘crisis’ and ‘borders’, and in contextualizing motivations to migrate beyond the binary of ‘political’ or ‘economic’ reasons, *For Sama* delinks from hegemonic migration discourses, and reveals a voice that, on its own terms, furthers epistemic decoloniality.

Waad utilized documentary auto-ethnography to provide an alternative visual register of how everyday life unfolds amid ongoing crises and proliferating borders, thereby raising awareness of both national (Syrian) and international politics. Additionally, her digital initiative *Action for Sama*, a campaign “to end the targeting of healthcare facilities in Syria”,<sup>2</sup> aims to stimulate direct political engagement. In the former, she claims her voice as a revolutionary in Syria seeking safety in Europe, hence expanding on the public hermeneutical resources regarding experiences of war and migration. With the latter, she utilizes the awareness raised by the film on these particular issues in the international circuits to stimulate clear political action. For example, in November 2021, Waad addressed the United Nations Council, where she criticized the inaction in holding the perpetrators of war crimes in Syria accountable. Waad al-Kateab therefore turns to a multiplicity of aesthetic, epistemic, and political manners of engaging European publics with a decolonial option.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.actionforsama.com/>.



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# Serious Laughs: Blackness, Humour and Social Media in Contemporary France

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**Abstract** This chapter analyses the emergence of a generation of influential black French humourists through YouTube, Instagram and other social media platforms, and connects it to the history of minority humour in France. The work of the new generation differs from the sketches of early comedians because of the specific opportunities and constraints that social media offer. Thanks to new media technologies, these comedians' work addresses both African diasporas within France and audiences in African and Caribbean countries connected to France by the legacies of the colonial experience. It thus has repercussions both within and beyond the nation.

**Keywords** Black comedians. Humour. Social media. Politics. Postcolonial France.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Three Generations of Black Humourists in France. – 3 Humour and Politics. – 4 Self-Irony and Diasporic Connections. – 5 Black Public Spheres and the Commodification of Race on Social Media.

## 1 Introduction

As most European former colonial powers, France entertains a complex relationship with the colonial past and its legacies on contemporary politics and culture (Forsdick, Murphy 2003; Borrel et al. 2021). Since at least the 1980s and the emergence of the first significant mobilizations against racism and discrimination (such as the 1981 Lyon riots), debates about the need to reshape the country's relationship with its former African colonies, about the memory of the Algeria

war, or about the tensions between universalist and multiculturalist models have cyclically come to the centre of the national debate, on the media as much as in the academia (Wieviorka 1996; Stam, Shohat 2012; Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting, Stovall 2012). Within this context, minorities' demand for stronger political and cultural recognition has often been met with hostility, and described (misleadingly) as an attempt to undermine the Republican principle of 'égalité' by promoting 'diversity'. Under the ongoing tenure of Emmanuelle Macron as president, these issues have once again come to the fore, as a result, on the one hand, of the presidential intention to reshape the debate through a series of highly symbolic acts including the commissioning of a report on the memory of the Algerian war (Stora 2021), on the issue of the restitution of African artworks (Sarr, Savoy 2018) and on the future of France-Africa relations (Mbembe 2021); and on the other hand, as a consequence of the steady increase of the influence of far-right parties such as *Rassemblement National* (led by Marine Le Pen) and *Reconquête* (led by controversial journalist Éric Zemmour) on the French political debate.

Within this framework, screen media<sup>1</sup> have played an important role in shaping public perceptions about racial, cultural and religious diversity in the country. As much research has shown, the presence of minorities on French screens has been marginal until recently (Rigoni 2007; Knox 2016), and existing representations are often perceived as discriminating by members of the minorities themselves (Malonga 2007; Mattelart 2017). Within this context, if people of North African descent have been given some space on French screens since the 1980s (Heargraves 1993), more marginal and controversial has been the place of black minorities (Jedlowski, forthcoming). Following a trend similar to the one that is possible to observe in relation to the American and British contexts (Saha 2018), research about Blackness on French screens focused mostly on content analysis (Rebillard, Noûs 2020), marginalizing the interest for other equally important approaches, such as the analysis of minority groups' modes of media reception, and the study of the place of these same groups in the processes of media production. Within this context, particularly notable is the absence of research on the growing phenomenon of black YouTubers and social media influencers that emerged over the past few years, opening up a new space for the representation of Blackness on French (small and super small) screens.

If the screen time for members of black French minorities began to increase in the mid-2000s (Malonga 2007; Macé 2007), partly as

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**1** When I use this term, I refer to all media produced for or distributed via the screen, including media distributed via the cinema, the television, the computer and the small screen devices of mobile phones.

an institutional response to the social fracture highlighted by the 2005 banlieue riots (Tshimanga, Gondola, Bloom 2009), the emergence of new media platforms changed the rules of the game. As a matter of fact,

web distribution allows producers to connect with viewers directly, without network distributors who shape and select narratives to appeal to broader audiences, conform to established formulas, and satisfy advertisers. (Day, Christian 2017, 4)

This allowed minority media producers to find new avenues for the production and circulation of their work beyond the hostile environment of (mostly white) legacy media production networks, and to constitute new, transversal audiences, beyond the narrow frontiers of the French nation. If interesting forms of alternative citizen media have emerged as a result of this process (Baker, Blaagaard 2016), more and more members of minority groups “are turning into professional [online] content creators” (Hou 2019, 535), positioning themselves at the crossroad between cyber-activism and digital entrepreneurship. Within a context marked by the expansion and increasing diversification of social media platforms, from YouTube to Instagram, from Twitter to TikTok and Facebook, the politically active members of black minorities (in France as elsewhere) go online not only to express political opinions but also to achieve visibility and develop new economic opportunities based on the commodification of Blackness and dissent.

Building on existing studies about this rapidly evolving landscape, in this essay I will investigate the emergence of alternative postcolonial public spaces and transversal black constituencies triggered by the multiplication of online screen media content produced by members of black French minorities. In particular, I will focus on the emergence of a new generation of influential black comedians who use YouTube and other social media platforms as key instruments for the promotion of their career. I will focus more closely on the work of a small number of them, including Christian Nsankete (Dycosh), Fadily Camara, and Jean-Claude Muaka (one of the comedians who emerged from the experience of the Black Power Comedy collective).

As I will discuss in the first part of this text, the work of these comedians needs to be read in relation to the longer history of minority humor in France, which opened up the space for the emergence of a new kind of humor based on self-reflexive accounts of the experience of being part of a racialized minority in France, geared toward the critique of French Republican universalism and its inability to address racial discrimination meaningfully (Quemener 2013; Vigouroux 2015). As I will argue, the work of early black French comedians differs from the experience of the new generation, for the lat-

ter's success is closely connected to the specific opportunities and constraints that social media offer. In this sense, the study of the political content of the sketches and caricatures produced by the new generation, which I will analyse in the second and third parts of this text, cannot be dissociated from a critical understanding of the economic and technological specificities of celebrity and fandom on social media platforms (Hou 2019; Abidin 2021). As I will highlight in the final section of this essay, the combined analysis of these two different but intertwined dimensions opens up the possibility to describe the specificities of the alternative postcolonial publics that the work of these comedians is constituting. These comedians' work addresses both African diasporas within France and audiences in African and Caribbean countries connected to France by the cultural, linguistic and political legacies of the colonial experience. It thus has repercussions both within and beyond the nation, highlighting "the challenges faced by citizens and states in the present era of technology and mobility" (Bernal 2014, 12).

## 2 Three Generations of Black Humorists in France

Because of the little space that was granted to minorities on French screens, early comedians had to find alternative avenues of expression. One of the most important of them, throughout the 1980s, was the (almost underground) scene of the Parisian *cafés-théâtre*, where a first generation of minority humorists emerged. Following a system that recalls the experience of African American comedians in the 1960s and 1970s, these early comedians adopted and reversed the stereotypes used against minorities, mobilizing them "as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors" (Boskins, Dorinson 1985), as well as a strategy to regain control of the representation of their social group and fight against existing mechanisms of social exclusion (Quemener 2013, 2; see also Weaver 2010). According to Nelly Quemener, despite its marginality in the wider landscape of French culture at the time, the work of this first generation paved the way for the emergence, in the following years, of more politically explicit humorists, such as Jamel Debbouze and Omar Sy (both from the suburban city of Trappes, in the Paris region), who came to the lime-light thanks to a short TV program aired in the late 1990s on Canal Plus, *Le cinéma de Jamel*.

Jamel Debbouze in particular played a central role in creating new avenues for the expression of minorities on French screens throughout the 2000s. The star status he acquired thanks to the participations to a few widely popular films in the early 2000s (in films such as *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulin*, 2001; *Astérix et Obélix, Mission Cléopâtre*, 2002; *Indigènes*, 2006) granted him the possibility to

develop his own TV show, *The Jamel Comedy Club* (JCC). Broadcasted intermittently on Canal Plus between 2006 and 2016, the show was constructed as a talent factory, where young and upcoming minority comedians who had begun to emerge in the underground scenes of small Parisian cafés-théâtre could come and express themselves. From 2008, the show, which participated in propelling a new generation of young black talents, including Thomas N’Gijol, Fabrice Eboué, Claudia Tagbo and Patson, began to be associated to a physical place, the Comedy Club, a medium-size theatre of 120 seats, opened by Debbouze himself in an old cinema hall, close to Place de la République, in central Paris. The creation of this place played an incontestably important role in pushing this generation to become collectively aware of the political relevance of its work in relation to the long-term historical experiences of minorities in France. As Debbouze underscored, “they (the French) asked our great grandparents to defend France, our grandparents to reconstruct it, our parents to clean it and we will try to narrate it” (quoted in Vigouroux 2015, 251).

The second generation of comedians that constituted itself around Debbouze discursively described its work as stand-up comedy, claiming a connection to the American cultural scene, and particularly to the tradition of African American actors and stand-up comedians (such as Richard Prior, Redd Foxx, and Eddy Murphy). As noted by Cécile Vigouroux,

the evocation of a genre also pertains to issues of *identity* and *power*, as it asserts the performer’s authority to decontextualize discourse and recontextualize it in another setting and to another audience. In the sociopolitical context of France, [...] performers of North and sub-Saharan descent use stand-up comedy as a forum to make their way of being French *heard* (both literally and figuratively) and, more importantly, to take an active part in creating a new narrative of the *here-and-now* France. (Vigouroux 2015, 245; italics in the original)

Within this context, the reference to African American actors gave this generation the opportunity to identify with positive black icons (which were lacking in the French television and theatre landscapes) and to express their criticism against the politics of minority representation in the Hexagon. As this example shows, African American popular culture played and still plays an important role in influencing black French humorists. However, black popular culture and political activism in France developed according to their own specific trajectories and temporalities, which at times converged and at times diverged from what took place on the other side of the Atlantic. We should thus refrain from suggesting any linear connection (Ndiaye 2008).

Whatever the influence of African American stand-up comedy on this phenomenon, Debbouze and the JCC gave visibility to this generation of comedians, opening up the doors of a successful career in theatre and TV shows for many of them over the following years. Their reputation was already established when, in the late 2000s, social media became mainstream. If the use of these platforms was marginal in their work, though, it became essential for the aspirations of what can be defined as the third generation of minority humorists that emerged throughout the 2010s. This generation, which is the object of my research, was strongly influenced by the work of Jamel Debbouze and the group of comedians who coalesced around him, but it equally had to elaborate new strategies to differentiate itself from the predecessors, in a context of growing saturation of the (relatively small) segment of the French entertainment market dedicated to minority comedians, and within a sector mostly run by 'white-owned' enterprises targeting mostly white French audiences. Social media became here a fundamental tool for newcomers to establish their reputation, before eventually entering the more formal circuits of live and television shows. Social media, with their constraints, their potentialities, and their specific ways of addressing and constituting new publics, should thus be considered the key feature that differentiates the third generation from its predecessors. Before investigating these specificities, it is important to better identify the comedians this research focuses on, and the content of their shows. As mentioned in the introduction, I decided to focus on three comedians in particular: Christian Nsankete (Dycosh), Fadily Camara, and Jean-Claude Muaka. This selection has been driven by their popularity, but also by the interest that their different approach to the use of social media presents for the analysis conducted here.

Dycosh is the most popular on social networks among the three comedians selected for this study, and the one who made YouTube the centre of his communication strategy since the beginning of his career. In February 2022 (at time of writing), his YouTube channel, DycoshTV, had 262,000 subscribers, and his Facebook page more than 435,000 followers.<sup>2</sup> As he explains in interviews, when at the beginning of his career he tried to obtain film and theatre roles participating to several auditions, he was deceived by the stereotypical roles that were offered to black actors. He then tried to achieve visibility by participating in open mike stand-up comedy shows in small venues around Paris, without much success. It is only when he began to

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, all data about subscriptions to the comedians' social media profiles refers to data available at the time of writing, in February 2022.



make YouTube videos in 2014 that his career really took off.<sup>3</sup> YouTube never became his main source of income (even if the high number of subscribers to his channel does guarantee some revenues), but it is thanks to his social media presence that he managed to attract the interest of key stakeholders in the industry, who gave him the opportunity to tour France with his live show, to obtain a contract with Canal Plus for the production of a TV series (*The Barber Shop*) and to collaborate with other, more established comedians.

Fairly different is the itinerary of Fadily Camara, whose acting career began in 2013, in a more conventional way, by performing in key stand-up comedy theatres around Paris, such as Debbouze's Comedy Club and Le Paname, also close to Place de la République. Social media became important in her career as tools to expand her fan base. Even if she has a YouTube channel (FadilyCamara) with almost 70,000 subscribers, her preferred platforms are Facebook and Instagram, where she has 300,000 and 200,000 followers respectively. Because of their less straightforward model for revenue sharing with content creators than YouTube (Kay 2021), in most cases presence on these platforms translates into remuneration only indirectly, via the visibility that the platforms guarantee. One can thus argue that Fadily Camara's focus on these platforms is the result of the fact that she adopted them as communication tools to promote her career as a live performer when she was already in the business, rather than as instruments to launch her career from the scratches, as in Dycosh's case.

In this respect, Jean-Claude Mouaka's trajectory is situated somehow in between. The most senior of the three comedians, Muaka's begun in the late 2000s with the ambition to develop a career in theatre drama. He then managed to carve out some space for himself in the Parisian stand-up comedy landscape (again, partly thanks to some appearances at the JCC show), but until 2015 he had to do several other small jobs to survive. It is around then that he started developing YouTube comedy series, initially together with a few other comedians (as part of the Black Power Comedy group, a small group of four black stand-up comedians that he contributed to create), and later independently. As for Dycosh, in many ways, it is through social media that he achieved the visibility that granted him enough audience support to push his career to the next level. He has today almost 500,000 followers on Facebook and his YouTube channel (Jean-Claude Muaka Comedy) has almost 120,000 subscribers.

<sup>3</sup> See "Dycosh : 'Je ne savais même pas ce qu'était YouTube'". *Le Monde*, 7 March 2017, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/03/07/dycosh-je-ne-savais-meme-pas-ce-qu-etait-youtube\\_5090592\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/03/07/dycosh-je-ne-savais-meme-pas-ce-qu-etait-youtube_5090592_3212.html).

### 3 Humour and Politics

Whatever their career path and social media strategy, each of these three comedians do not shy away from politically engaged content. In particular, two interrelated issues preoccupy them the most: the experience of being black in contemporary France and the need to open up the space for the expression of racial diversity on French mainstream media. As Jean-Claude Muaka suggests,

France needs to accept its history, with its strengths and weaknesses. [For instance] at school they talked to us about Napoleon as a great hero, but Napoleon has also re-established slavery! He did it! And none told us about it!<sup>4</sup>

What Muaka suggests here is the importance to uncover the multiplicity of French history, the historical complexity beyond the diversity of contemporary French society, and the violence that exists behind it. Within this context, social media are instruments that open up new possibilities. In Dycosh's words: "I am convinced that, if we want to see more minorities on television and in the cinema, these people called 'from minorities' simply have to take the lead. They have to create their own roles, they have to write, to direct. Because 'who better than us can talk about us?'" Social media are seen by this generation as the tool that can make this objective achievable.

A first strategy these comedians tend to adopt is the denunciation of everyday forms of racism, for instance by laughing at the stereotypes implicit in many casual conversations. Fadily Camara's YouTube sketch "Je ne suis pas raciste enfin ! J'ai déjà été au Togo!" (I'm Not Racist! I've Already Been to Togo)<sup>5</sup> is an excellent example in this sense. In the video she re-enacts a number of casual conversations in which people try to guess her origins, thus showing their deep-seated belief that a black person cannot be born in France, and that she must thus inevitably come from somewhere else. "I think I should post a video in which I list all the things that people should not say" - she ironically suggests during the sketch. "Because people actually do not realize. There are people you cannot blame, they're simply unaware of how hurtful their questions can be". In a similar vein, in a series of Instagram sketches such as "Les remarques déplacées des blancs" (White People's Inappropriate Comments) and "Parce que

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<sup>4</sup> From the online interview on the YouTube channel Spot Comedy "Jean-Claude Mouaka - One man costaud - interview Spot Comedy". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaWH5LpR6vY>.

<sup>5</sup> "Je ne suis pas raciste enfin ! J'ai déjà été au Togo!". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR4pp8Kz2s>.

tous les renois se ressemblent..." (Because All Black People Look Alike),<sup>6</sup> Dycosh rehearses and mocks recurring stereotypes about black people, such as their innate capacity to dance, their physical strength, or their sexual potency. More offbeat is the style of Jean-Claude Muaka's YouTube series *Les trois frères* (The Three Brothers) in which he takes contemporary controversies as starting points to develop open debates between three imaginary black brothers who present different points of view, tainted with humour, intellectual nuance or political indignation. In a sketch like "Nérophobes",<sup>7</sup> the issue that is tackled is racial discrimination against black minorities by people of North African descent in France; while in the sketch "L'Afrique n'est pas un laboratoire" (Africa Is not a Lab)<sup>8</sup> the starting point for the debate is the widely criticized opinion of a French doctor who, in the initial phases of the COVID pandemic, during a television talk show, suggested to test new vaccines on African people first, to avoid putting the life of French people at risk.

Strictly connected to this first thematic line is the issue of police violence against members of black minorities, which is also discussed in several sketches. Here again the styles are very different, but the clips share the intention to raise audiences' awareness about this issue. Dycosh's sketch "Comment éviter un contrôle de police" (How to Avoid a Police Control)<sup>9</sup> is centred around a fake advertizing campaign for a new app called Waze for niggaz, designed to detect police checking point in the surrounding areas. As one of the fictive black users of the app interviewed in the clip says, "since I use *Waze for niggaz*, I spend three times less of my time in police custody!". Another one insists, "*Waze for niggaz*? It really changed my life! I used to see cops more than my family!". In the same clip, another product is also advertized, White face, a lotion that can be used to better prepare for job interviews. As the advertizer says, "if you too have all the skills required, but never get the job, discover our new product, *White Face*. The balanced composition of our product will give your skin the right colour to make your interview a success!". Less straightforward is Jean-Claude Muaka's sketch "Violences Policières" (Police Violence), of the *Three brothers* series.<sup>10</sup> Here, the topic is in-

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6 Both videos are included in the YouTube clip "Dycosh best of Instagram". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhTiyfuY0-8>.

7 "Trois frères: Nérophobes". [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Rf03wePO\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Rf03wePO_g).

8 "Trois Frères (Le Bon, La Brute & Le Naïf): L'Afrique n'est pas un laboratoire". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWPfPotEVwg&t=63s>.

9 "Comment éviter un contrôle de police". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X90PXT6tLNY&t=19s>.

10 "Trois frères: Violences Policières". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTBheWu9S-0&t=118s>.

roduced by a fight between two of the three brothers, in which one reacts angrily against the second's rant about police violence in the United States, underlying the hypocrisy of black French people who get mad at what happens on the other side of the Atlantic but stay silent in front of recurring episodes of police violence and discrimination in France, such as the killing of Adama Traoré in 2016. Playing on the divergences between the three brothers' opinions, the sketch articulates a nuanced discourse about racism and law enforcement which resonates with audiences of different ethnic and class background, as indicated by the numerous comments to the video, including that of a self-identified "white cop", who praise the intelligence of the clip.

#### 4 Self-Irony and Diasporic Connections

If the videos described above are the most openly political, they are not necessarily the most successful among those that these comedians post online. Another thematic line seems to attract more viewers: clips that emphasize and mock some cultural or behavioral aspects of black communities themselves. On Dycosh's channel, for instance, the series *Sapologie* and *Les mecs de cité en soirée* (The Guys of the Hood Out for the Night) are the most successful, with some achieving more than a million views.<sup>11</sup> In these videos Dycosh takes some of the attributes that are often stereotypically mentioned to describe certain communities (including by members of these communities themselves), and pushes them to the extreme, re-appropriating and reversing the stereotype, while making the audiences aware of it. In particular, in these series, Dycosh focuses on the extravagant attention for expensive brands and luxurious clothes ("La sape")<sup>12</sup> among people of Congolese or Ivorian descent, and on the susceptibility and aggressivity of young black men living in the banlieues (the marginalized suburbs).

Another common form of self-reflexive irony concerns the use of language, and the caricature of the African accents spoken by some members of the African diaspora in France. Dycosh's series *The Barber Shop* and Muaka's series *The Barber Flop* (that he produced together with the Black Power comedy collective) both mock linguistic and cultural aspects displayed by members of the African diasporas in France, also insisting on the stereotypes and tensions exist-

<sup>11</sup> Check for instance the clip "LA SAPOLOGIE #1 - Il garde ses chaussures dans un frigo". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwvB5EDq9y4>, or the clip "Les mecs de cité en soirée". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYFRMVLPtao&t=134s>.

<sup>12</sup> This term comes from the phenomenon of the "Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes" emerged on the two sides of the Congo river, in Brazzaville, Kinshasa, since the 1960s.

ing between different groups within the larger diasporic community. In the third episode of the series *The Barber Flop* for instance, a group of black men including members of the Caribbean and African diasporas, discuss the issue of slavery and colonialism, producing an entertaining as much as surreal competition about who has been enslaved for longer.<sup>13</sup> In Dycosh's sketch "Embrouille dans un barber shop à Château d'Eau" (Fight in a Barber Shop in the Château d'Eau Neighborhood)<sup>14</sup> the conflict erupts when a Caribbean customer claims that Caribbean people have nothing to do with the African continent, provoking the indignation of his African barber.

Self-irony is not only oriented at cultural and linguistic stereotypes, but also at forms of political activism practiced by members of black French minorities themselves. Dycosh, for instance, has a series titled *Black Is Beautiful*, whose protagonist, Aristote, "the best black activist in the whole of France, the last Black Panther of the French delegation", is so obsessed by blackness that he only does things black. During one of the sketches titled "Il vit dans le noir" (He Lives in the Dark),<sup>15</sup> for instance, a voice over asks him a number of questions about his everyday life: "Aristote, your're cooking? How do you spice your food?", "Only black pepper! Yes, black is beautiful!", "But, what I see here: a snowboard, ski boots... Aristote, you ski?", "Yes, but only on black runs!". And later, on the image of Aristote pushing a hand cart full of bricks, "Aristote, you work? Do you have a contract?", "No, I'm on the black market! Black is beautiful!!!". In a similar vein, in one of the rare sketches produced by these comedians that discusses gender issues, "Parité homme-femme? A 80% ça me va!" (Gender Equality? At a 80% Rate It's Ok for Me!),<sup>16</sup> Fadily Camara mocks the ambiguities of gender equality discourse as expressed by some of her friends. "I know that we want men and women to be equal. But do we want to be equal about everything? Because I'm going to tell you, we're going to gain in plenty of ways, but we are also going to lose a number of things. For instance, we will not be able to put pressure on our partners saying, 'Come on, be a man!'" Through this kind of inward jokes, these comedians reveal the complexity and ambiguity of the struggles in which they are engaged, and by making people laugh about them they also raise awareness about the issues at stake.

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**13** "The barber flop - Episode 3". [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=802403146581773&external\\_log\\_id=ab401806-f646-4224-8c52-90e7a5f16a82&q=black%20power%20comedy](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=802403146581773&external_log_id=ab401806-f646-4224-8c52-90e7a5f16a82&q=black%20power%20comedy).

**14** "Embrouille dans un barber shop à Château d'eau". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16xOuBdwWYI>.

**15** "Il vit dans le noir". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfrNwA-3tmk>.

**16** "Parité homme-femme? A 80% ça me va!". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=conCFkcvXl8>.

A last recurring thematic line worth describing here has to do with these comedians' relation to Africa. As I will better discuss in the next section of this text, if compared to the television shows and live performances that characterized the work of the previous generations, the use of social media opens up new possibilities to connect to African audiences, triggering the emergence of a discourse about the interaction between the diaspora and the homeland that was less significant in the work of the predecessors. In several sketches, for instance, Jean-Claude Muaka travels to African cities or to the French Caribbean Islands to meet and perform together with local stand-up comedians. In these sketches he plays around reciprocal stereotypes between black French people and francophone Africans. In a sketch shot in Abidjan together with local comedian Moses, "Bienvenu à Abidjan ft. Moses" (Welcome to Abidjan ft. Moses),<sup>17</sup> Moses picks up Jean-Claude Muaka at the airport and the two have a conversation in the car, while going home. At one point, Muaka comments, "So say, Abidjan is like Paris, you too have traffic jams!", and Moses replies, "So, you thought we were living in a jungle, didn't you?". But Muaka insists, "I think you'd like Paris better! If you like Abidjan, you'll definitely like Paris", and Moses asks, "Are you telling me to leave Abidjan to go to Paris? What does it mean to ask something like this?". And later, "Don't you think that, if they had shown you on French TV what a paradise Abidjan is, you would have all tried to colonize us again?". Then Moses asks his girlfriend, who is in the back seat, "Baby, even if you had the visa, you would have never left Abidjan, isn't?", "Of course I would have!", she replies, and Moses suddenly stops to get her off the car. The conversation continues on this tone, playing around stereotypes and reciprocal perceptions with irony, thus deconstructing them while recognizing the role they play in the relation between the two groups.

Sketches like this signal also the emergence of a space of interaction between diasporic and African comedians, in which diasporic humorists often pay a tribute to their African counterparts, emphasizing their desire to reconnect with their African cultural roots as well as with contemporary expressions of African popular culture. In the sketch "Quand Dycosh rencontre Gohu..." (When Dycosh Meets Gohu)<sup>18</sup> Dycosh takes an auto-ironic stand on this phenomenon. In the sketch, Dycosh sees Gohu, one of the greatest living Ivorian comedians (protagonist of Ivorian TV series such as *Les Guignoles d'Abi-*

<sup>17</sup> "Bienvenu à Abidjan ft. Moses". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKLo0sXk3vg&t=301s>. Similar sketches playing on reciprocal perceptions can be found also in Jean-Claude Muaka's series "Coach Muaka", such as in "Coach mwaka... parole lingala" (Coach Muaka... Speaks Lingala). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvg4WDotmA0>.

<sup>18</sup> "Quand Dycosh rencontre Gohu...". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRNhmLeW-VU>.

*djan* and *Ma Famille*, which had a pan-African success over the past twenty-five years), but mistakes him for a member of the internationally successful Ivorian music band Magic System, provoking Gohu's anger. With this twist, Dycosh mocks the attitude of some diasporic comedians and influencers, who emphasize their proximity with the African cultural scene to the point of faking it.

## 5 Black Public Spheres and the Commodification of Race on Social Media

Analysing the use of social media by influencers belonging to minority groups in Singapore, Crystal Abidin (2021) coined the concept of 'minority celebrities'. She used this term to identify celebrities whose fame and recognition are

founded on commodifying and representing a usually marginalised and stigmatised demographic of society, built upon the validation and celebration of minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life. (Abidin 2021, 600)

While relevant, this definition does not fully capture the work of the comedians studied here, as their work addresses both black French minorities and African audiences beyond the borders of France, and thus participates in constituting publics that, as I will argue below, can hardly be understood through the prism of existing definitions of black, African or diasporic public spheres.

However, Crystal Abidin's definition remains relevant for this analysis because of its emphasis on the imbrication of political and commercial logics. The concept of 'minority celebrities' in fact helps identifying the specificity of the media environment within which the work of Dycosh, Jean-Claude Muaka and Fadily Camara circulates, and its difference from the environment within which the work of previous generations of French minority comedians used to be consumed. In the mid-2000s, when Debbouze and the generation of comedians that emerged around him became popular, their work began to be distributed by national commercial television networks such as Canal Plus. These networks were interested in maximizing the share of the national audience that minority humor could reach. As a result, despite the critical role they played in debunking a number of racial stereotypes, these comedians were caught in wider processes of 'commodification of race' through which capitalism co-opted and exploited racial difference "for both profit and the reinforcement of white supremacy" (Saha 2018, 58). In the opinion of Nelly Quemener

(2013, 11), then, their work ultimately participated in “domesticating issues of race and ethnicity for a wider public”.

As Paul Gilroy (1994, 61) observes,

successive communicative technologies organise space and time in different ways and have solicited and fostered different kinds of identification. They create and manipulate memory in dissimilar ways and stage the corporeal and physical enigmas of cultural identity in contrasting processes.

Indeed, the media environment within which the comedians analysed in this essay operate does not produce the same kind of dynamics seen in the case of legacy media. If commodification is still an influential factor, here it operates in significantly different ways. Social media encourage “creators to compete for attention and rewards them economically for promoting themselves”, making self-commodification and self-branding “integral part of working as a creator” (Hokka 2021, 144), but they do so within a media environment that is potentially much larger (in terms of geographic scope) than the one within which national broadcasters used to operate. Contrary to the national TV channels that distributed Debbouze’s shows to mostly French audiences residing in France, the circulation of media content via the internet has virtually no boundaries.<sup>19</sup> This means that, by posting their content on YouTube and other social networks, the third generation of black humorists analysed in this essay do not target exclusively audiences based in France (be them members of ethnic minority groups, or part of the white majority). Within this context, in order to commodify content, these comedians operate according to logics that differ from those that Quemener analysed in relation to Canal Plus and its distribution of Debbouze’s work (e.g. the domestication of racial difference). Commodification here takes place through the ‘afrocentrisation’ of sketches and content so as to go beyond France’s boundaries and convoke Afropolitan audiences that are more interested in African popular culture than in French politics about race and discrimination. Hence the relevance of sketches that go beyond French politics to convoke Afropolitan publics by playing on inward irony and on the interplay between diasporic and African forms of popular culture. Hence the fact that, if sketches that insist on politically sensitive topics (such as police violence and racism) do exist, they are by far less successful than sketches that focus on African and diasporic communities themselves. Following Achille Mbembe’s

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<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, also a myth, as many factors, including the digital divide and various forms of digital surveillance, participate in limiting the circulation of content on the internet.



work (2010), the concept of Afropolitanism is used here as a concept that challenges “victimhood discourses attached to Africa and the Black diaspora” (Gehrmann 2016, 65) and opens up the way for the description of “a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being African in the world” (Gikandi 2011, 9; quoted in Gehrmann 2016) that is constitutively hybrid and projected toward the future.

Existing works that criticize Jurgen Habermas’s well-known formulation of the concept of ‘public sphere’ tend to insist on the need to consider the inevitable multiplicity and variety of the competing public spheres that constitute the fabric of our societies (Fraser 1990). Building on this kind of criticism several alternative concepts of public sphere have been formulated in relation to black people, in Africa and across the diaspora. In relation to African American people, for instance, Catherine Squires suggests to elaborate a model able to recognize the existence of different types of black public sphere, all infused with important political dimensions. As Squires argues,

a public can *enclave* itself, hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning. It is also possible to create a *counterpublic* which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and perhaps utilize traditional social movement tactics (boycotts, civil disobedience). Finally, a public that seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time acts as a *satellite* public sphere. (Squires 2002, 448; italics in the original)

In what concerns sub-Saharan Africa, Peter Ekeh (1975) suggested, already in the 1970s, the possibility to describe the existence of two, almost parallel public spheres, related to the impact of colonialism on African societies. On the one hand, a public sphere connected to the modern state with its western inspired institutions, and on the other hand, a public sphere connected to the existence of what he calls a ‘primordial public’ and on pre-colonial forms of sociality and collective cohesion, including ethnic and religion institutions. British anthropologist Karin Barber, further complexified this model by underlining the fluid nature of the imagined communities that have emerged in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of colonialism and decolonization. In her words, because of the specific historical trajectories of state formation in the continent, African publics cannot but

shrink and expand from moment to moment, sometimes consolidating ethnic linguistic communities far smaller than the national entity, at other times by-passing the nation to convoke a pan-African, black, or pan-human audience. (Barber 2007, 202)

Finally, looking at Eritrean diasporas in the United States, Victoria Bernal (2005) highlighted the role of new media in triggering processes by which diasporas develop specific forms of public sphere, that are simultaneously related to the experience of living abroad and to the intimacy of the diaspora's connection with the homeland. These processes end up expanding the boundaries of the nation to produce diasporic public spheres, that are key future of what she calls "the nation as network" (Bernal 2014; see also Osman 2017; Ponzanesi 2020).

In my view, the work of the comedians discussed in this essay is situated somewhere in between these different understandings of the black public sphere. It builds on the innovative possibility offered by social media, which give these comedians the possibility of addressing simultaneously minority audiences in the diaspora and African publics based in the continent. If, according to Céline Vigouroux (2015, 267), the commodification of the work of the first two generations of black humorists in France, within a mediascape "where non-stereotypical African or Arab counter-models [was] still rare and in a social sphere where non-whites [were] absent from dominant positions", was likely "to reinforce stereotypes of 'Black jesters entertaining Whites'", the impact produced by the third generation of humorists studied here is significantly different. Their work is oriented *simultaneously* at both French-speaking black minorities in France and across the world, and at francophone African audiences in Africa. As such, it interrogates the position of black minorities in a Western society, using humor as an instrument to "subvert, deconstruct, and engage with the state", and as a tool for "emotional discharge" that brings with it some form of (both individual and collective) therapeutic power (Obadare 2016, 12; see also Reichl, Stein 2005). But it also produces a self-ironic discourse that permits to go beyond the "hydraulic models of domination and resistance" that have long dominated African and African studies debates on the public sphere (Willems 2012, 23; Mbembe 2001). By doing so, it convenes publics that exist beyond their status as minorities or as diasporas; publics that have Afropolitan cultural references and are transnationally interconnected; whose political preoccupations include but also exceed issues related to the representation of race in France; publics who are interested in larger questions about the place of Africa and black people in the future of the world.

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# Decolonial Mediatic Artist Engagement and the Palestinian Question

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**Abstract** The present chapter takes into account some cases of mediatic artist engagement of unaffiliated citizens connected to the permission for the Palestinians to narrate (Said 1984). On the one hand, they are considered as forms of decolonial mediatic engagement in the face of the persisting colonial matrix of power (Quijano 1992), on the other hand, as linguistic forms and formulas conveying their subversive power in terms of aesthetic-political appeal in the context of postcolonial intellectual engagements in the public sphere.

**Keywords** Counter-publics. Artist engagement. Palestine. Decoloniality. Border culture.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Palestinian Cyborature as Decolonial Border Culture. – 3 Mediatic Artist Decolonial Narratives: DAM, Shadia Mansour, and the Middle East Eyes News Source as Case Studies. – 4 Concluding Remarks.

## 1 Introduction

Our paper will try to tackle some cases of mediatic artist<sup>1</sup> engagement of unaffiliated citizens connected to the Palestinian question

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Although this research was jointly conducted by both authors, Luigi Cazzato is responsible for Sections 1 and 2, while Annarita Taronna is responsible for Sections 3 and 4.

**1** As widely defined by Paola Zaccaria (2014), activism has been worked out by the chicano border artists who radicalize the concept of aesthetics, creating artistic works with a strong political and social impact.

and diaspora, to the permission for the Palestinians to narrate (Said 1984) and their 'loci of enunciation'. Among others, hip-hop activist singers (e.g. British-born Palestinian Shadia Mansour, the Palestinian-Israeli historical group DAM, Palestinian activist Rafeef Ziadah, Palestinian-American rapper Ragtop and his band The Philistines), networks of artists and cultural workers and participatory journalists (e.g. Middle East Eye) will be considered as cases of popular resistance. They are taken into account, on the one hand, as forms of decolonial mediatic engagement in the age of mass mediation and mass migration in the face of the persisting colonial matrix of power (Quijano 1992), on the other hand, as linguistic forms and formulas conveying their subversive power in terms of aesthetic-political appeal.

More specifically, we will select and build a corpus of 'texts' from the artistic and mediatic production in order to assess whether and to what extent common thematic connectors relating to issues of struggle, resistance, collective consciousness and resilience may be identified and problematized in line with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power (1991) and Chantal Mouffe's definition of art as the embodiment of a political dimension (2001). Through these theoretical lenses, we will analyze the performative language of the 'texts' collected by focusing on their symbolic vocabulary, which may incorporate meaningful images, provoke collective emotions, evoke a feeling of struggle and togetherness and, therefore, produce counter-public discourses. Accordingly, the notion of counterpublics, as widely explored by Ponzanesi and Habed (2018), is central to understanding the way in which the texts under scrutiny are performed and circulated by artists, activists and writers in order to stake their claims and legitimate the impact of postcolonial intellectual engagements in the public sphere, thus providing a sense of active belonging and alternative political manifestation. Finally, the close analysis of language through these theoretical lenses will also attempt to show the extent to which the mediatic activist narratives under discussion can be conceived of as a means of reaffirming Palestinian political existence and resistance. By contributing to the deconstruction of the hegemonic political-military order, the 'texts' in this corpus project an alternative political imagination which stands in direct opposition to Israel's otherwise dominant "cognitive imperialism" (Shapiro 2004; Alim 2020).

We will adopt the "decolonial option" perspective<sup>2</sup> (Mignolo, Escobar 2010) informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk 1995), along with Narrative Theory in section 3, since this will provide an eclectic theoretical framework that draws on politics, sociology, linguis-

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<sup>2</sup> Although we mainly adopt the decolonial perspective, we also rely on postcolonial tools. As to the debate between the decolonial and the postcolonial stances, see Carillo, Cazzato and Percopo 2019; Colpani, Mascot, Smiet 2022.

tics and literary studies. For Narrative Theory, we will draw on Somers and Gibson (1994), as well as on Baker (2007). The types of narrative analyzed by these scholars seem to be typical of both the Palestinian narrative, which stresses that Palestinians are the displaced aboriginals who have been replaced by the Israelis, and the Israeli narrative, which maintains that Palestine is a “land without people for a people without land” and a “Promised Land” given to the Jews as “a contract between God and his own ‘chosen people’” (Abdel Jawad 2006, 72). As we can safely infer, both narratives portray a complex relationship of amity and/or enmity, a dynamic which has dominated Palestinian and Israeli discourses since 1948, when the state of Israel was created.

## 2 Palestinian Cyborature as Decolonial Border Culture

Our main concern here is intellectual and artistic engagements in the age of mass mediation-cum-migration. We will start by considering the Gramscian concepts of ‘popular culture’ and the ‘organic intellectual’ as provided by the most contemporary critical readings (Ponzanesi 2021), then we will move on by putting these categories in the context of the Middle East and the Palestinian diaspora, seeing what issues they can raise in these geo-social dimensions. Finally, we will consider whether the category of ‘colonial difference’ is relevant for our examples of public mediatic creative engagement, arising from the Palestinian condition as a borderland of colonial modernity.

Even nowadays, half a century after the Birmingham School was born, the status of popular culture is often related to lower forms of art production. On the contrary, Stuart Hall, after Gramsci, famously sees popular culture as the site of the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. With reference to popular culture and the need to control it through ‘reforms’ or ‘transformations’, he maintains:

Popular culture is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the *ground* on which the transformations are worked. (Hall 1981, 443; emphasis added)

Therefore, he goes on: “we should always start with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably *inside it*” (443; emphasis added).

A propos of ‘ground’, we can speak after Gramsci, again, of a ‘war of position’ fought on the terrain of popular culture, which at the same time can be crucial for power control as well as for subaltern resistance to it. If this is so, the new forms of popular art arising in the context of the Palestinian question provide the milieu in which a new figure of organic intellectual has taken action, having “the responsi-

bility - as Hall would have it - of transmitting [ideas and knowledge] [...] to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class" (Hall 1992, 281). It may be odd to speak of intellectuality here, but not so much if we remember that, for example, Chuck D, front man of the US hip-hop group Public Enemy, once called hip hop the "CNN for urban youth". Ironically, hip-hop culture, whose roots are African American, may instill an awareness among the Middle Eastern masses and thus provide resistance towards, and struggle against, Israeli colonial ideology, which has its origin in the Zionist project and the US as the major political and financial supporter of Israel.

In the Middle East, the question of popular culture is even more complex since the binarism high/low culture is complicated by a number of specific factors, which Stein and Swedemburg (2004) have identified in two hegemonic paradigms: the political/economic and the nationalist. According to the first, in a condition marked by land grabbing and mass repression, (the production and study of) popular music may be, at worst, ethically frivolous, and at best, simply irrelevant. As to the latter frame of mind, the controversy about popular culture is related to the issue of 'tradition vs modernity', where the latter term is inevitably associated with the exogenous arrival of cultural products and consumerist trends from the West and, consequently, with the history of colonialism. In short, hip hop is seen *only* as a vilified form of music coming from the dominant America, far from the national (refined or popular) Arab singing. More specifically, since the 2011 regional uprisings, Palestinian cultural productions have been fueled by the collective energy of protest, dissent and political reimagination, as artists have infused the public aesthetic with new symbols of pan-Palestinian identity and nationalism. Hence, as will be confirmed later, hip hop's merging of tradition and modernity is not a theoretical hypothesis but a practical engagement.

Perhaps Walter Mignolo's decolonial approach may help to disentangle these complications related to colonial history. He envisages and elaborates a decolonial epistemology, which he calls "border thinking":

Border thinking is of the essence as we switch from imperial and territorial epistemology (e.g., global linear thinking) to an epistemology emerging from the places and bodies left out of the line (e.g., the anthropos, the Orientals, the Third World, etc.). (Mignolo 2011, 91-2)

In other words,

border thinking becomes the necessary critical method for the political and ethical project of filling in the gaps and revealing the imperial complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. (Mignolo 2007, 499)



Finally, border thinking is to take a step into the grammar of decolonization and into the exteriority of modernity.

Therefore, only if we take this step outside (the rhetoric of) modernity, can a cultural phenomenon like Arab hip hop be seen neither as inappropriate, or simply playful, nor as the Americanization of the local culture. Rather, it is a border cultural space, external to hegemonic modernity, that belongs to the circuit of 'colonial difference', which creates diverse but connected social and geographical borderlands, in the same way as Afro-American ghettos and occupied territories in Palestine are connected and governed by the same logic of coloniality. As colonial borderlands, they can be both spaces of repression and, as Mignolo would have it, subaltern "loci of enunciation", whose existence is negated by hegemonic epistemology. A similarly ambivalent shift has been engendered by the spread of globalization, especially capitalism and consumption, a shift that has both produced a culture of loneliness - not merely one of isolation or solitude - and has fostered a yearning for forms of sociality for which the music industry aims to provide ready-made solutions (Gilroy 2011, 129).

Our aim is, then, to highlight these border spaces, in our case Arab (Brown) and Black, that spontaneously interconnect each other and disconnect from each national history, becoming global practices of decolonial thinking with meaningful political potential. This is not to claim that European settler colonialism and the Israeli version are the same, nor that Palestinians and American Blacks are the same. The key point is that both are subject to the coloniality of power and live within the border space established by their colonial ruler.

Hence, the importance of the political potential of popular culture that, on the one hand, delinks (Mignolo 2007) itself from national histories and, on the other, links itself to other common oppressive destinies. Being a song, a spoken poem or a web product, they are both works of art and cultural-political texts as the analysis of the corpus of the texts collected and examined in the next section will show. As a result, their liberation struggle is performed both through aesthetics and through politics, which are, as Caroline Rooney stresses as far as hip hop is concerned, the aesthetics and politics of orality (speaking) and aurality (listening). She claims that, to a certain extent,

hip hop can be understood to be preoccupied in its own way with an ethics of listening: one that is critical of state corruption (as cassette sermons quite often are), serving to counter such with an emphasis on authenticity [...] This is a matter of collectively practiced re-attunements achieved not merely through the recognition of the sincere or committed message but through the affective effects of sonic communication and live reception. (Rooney 2013, 34)

Tamer Nafar is the front man of DAM (Da Arab MC - Microphone Controller), an Israeli Palestinian rap crew, and this is how he puts it in an interview:

When he [Tupac Shakur] was saying that it is a white man's world, this is what I see here [...] They have this four hundred years of slavery, we have our occupation. They have the speeches of Malcolm X [...] who got killed, and we have Naji al-Ali [creator of the popular cartoon figure Handala], who got assassinated. It is the big picture, and we just need this spot that you can see it. And get connected to this spot and then you can open your eyes and see *the whole picture*. (McDonald 2004, 245-6; emphasis added)

Hip hop is popular in Palestine and among the Palestinian diaspora, as well as in Europe and elsewhere, since it can combine two far and yet so close worlds, precisely belonging to the same whole 'figure in the carpet', to the same trope, the trope of blackness.<sup>3</sup> So much for the political content. As to the aesthetic content, Alex Lubin makes it clear that hip hop represents especially in Paul Gilroy's positioning of it in Black Atlantic culture, as the cross-fertilization of Afro-America and the Caribbean:

Modes of trans-local and transnational engagement constituted by a pastiche of local sounds and beats produced over globalized corporate and commercial networks. In hip-hop the local is always and already formed by transnational migrations of sound. (Lubin 2013, 5-6)

In short, hip hop, along with its present-day use of digital media, may embody what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (2012) calls "cyborature". Through this crasis between 'cyber' and 'orature' (oral learning), he refers to the new aesthetic reality, which is neither simply written nor simply oral, but both: a reality where modern Western culture and its coloniality can no longer impose a hierarchical divide between the written (the master) and the oral (the bondsman).<sup>4</sup>

In 2010, an international music event hosted by the UK hip-hop scene and fronted by DAM's Tamer Nafar was held in London by what has been labelled "The dream team of Arabic hip hop": Lyrical Al-

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<sup>3</sup> As regards this trope, i.e., Palestinianness as Blackness, see Solombrino (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o does not underestimate the importance of the bondsman's orality: "from the freedom spirituals (negro spirituals) to hip hop, Afro-Caribbean and African-American orature has played a central role in the molding of modern culture in the Caribbean and America and its impact has been felt in global culture" (Wa Thiong'o 2012, 83).

liance.<sup>5</sup> The Arab artists came from North Africa, the Middle East, the US and the UK (including Shadia Mansour, a British-born Palestinian singer known as “the first lady of Arabic hip hop” – “The Kufi-yeh is Arab” has garnered almost two million YouTube views). They introduced themselves in this way:

Taking the legendary Mu’allaqāt poems – written at a time when the Arab region was the cultural and intellectual centre of the world – as a starting point, the artists will dig deep into the roots of their art form, developing new work together in a series of live sessions and workshops throughout the year. (Dash Arts)<sup>6</sup>

As we assumed before, modern Arab hip hop, if it is far from Palestinian folk music (what Nafar calls “wedding songs about olive trees or farming or goats”), paradoxically is not far from the ancient (sixth/eighth century) Bedouin orature. Lyrical Alliance crew’s attempt is a double one. It connects two histories: Mu’allaqāt poems, with, as Mansour claims, the present circumstances of their contemporary identity. It connects two geographies or, as Nafar makes clear, “two cultures: Arabic and hip hop and some wicked ass beats”. In this light, Palestinian hip hop does not happen to be a merely superstructural phenomenon to the material conditions of the Palestinians nor a mere appropriation of Black American musical aesthetics. It links Arab ghettos here in the Middle East with Afro-American ghettos there in the US: two comparative borderlands united by their shared experience of the coloniality of power.

This is but a sample of the new organic intellectuals in the age of mass mediation-cum-migration, intellectuals who, while aware of the commonality of the colonial link, try to delink from its logic through cyborature. Finally, these transnational youth cultural phenomena may become an actual means of deterritorializing the nation-state frame of mind. Marta Cariello has shown how, besides the drive to return to their homeland, diasporic Palestinian writers (like Handal and Hammad), through polyglossia “expand and disseminate Palestinian identity through a specific and contemporary drive, which becomes a panethnic narrative of a transnational exilic condition” (Cariello 2013, 34).<sup>7</sup>

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**5** Lyrical Alliance Artists: DJ MK (UK), Rabah Donquishoot (Algeria), Shadia Mansour (UK-Palestine), Rayess Bek (Lebanon), Samm (Jordan), Tamer Nafar (Israel-Palestine), VJ Jana Saleh (Lebanon), feat. Talib Kweli (US).

**6** <https://bit.ly/3VSAMUS>.

**7** Admittedly, this is an awkward argument when it comes to the stateless condition of Palestine, and yet, as Abdullah Öcalan’s democratic confederalism theory and practice shows (<http://ocalan-books.com/#/book/democratic-confederalism>), a post-national option is viable.

### **3 Mediatic Artist Decolonial Narratives: DAM, Shadia Mansour, and the Middle East Eyes News Source as Case Studies**

Drawing on the subversive potential of activist aesthetics and public politics that has been examined in the previous section from a theoretical decolonial perspective, our attempt here is to apply the concept of performative language(s) to such forms of mediatic engagement as those embraced by Palestinian hip-hop activist singers, networks of artists and cultural workers, and participatory independent journalists. Specifically, we aim to investigate what hip hop and independent journalism share in terms of decolonial performativity within those “oppositional culture(s)” defined by Gilroy (1992) as a set of non-mainstream values, counter-hegemonic imaginaries and non-institutionalized agendas. To this end, we will discuss the extent to which both rap singers and independent journalists can resort to (re)active interventions, intermedial discursive practices and formations to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations by acting in public space(s). As unaffiliated cultural and social agents, they exercise their citizenship by creating a space of dissent, often becoming a target of oppressive regimes, in order to provide a set of alternative narratives and critiques that contrast violence by government policies and practices. Among them, the activist productions by hip-hop activist singers Shadia Mansour and the historical group DAM, along with the Middle East Eye’s participatory journalists, will be analyzed for the subversive performative power of their discourses.

For such an analysis, we have relied on two complementary theoretical frameworks based on Baker’s narrative theory (2007) and van Dijk’s (1995) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis with a focus on its related enunciation strategies. More specifically, by assuming narrative as our only means of making sense of the world and our relationship with the humans that inhabit it, Baker’s socio-narrative theory distinguishes between four types of narrative: personal, public, conceptual and metanarrative. Personal narratives relate to people’s accounts of everyday life, of their individual dilemmas, personal suffering, fear, joy and apprehension that appeal to our common humanity and make space for neglected or suppressed experiences, as in the Palestinian question. Personal narratives often overlap with public narratives, namely, shared stories elaborated by and circulated among small or large groups of individuals and constrained by the range of meaningful symbols and images that evoke collective emotions.

Additionally, Baker’s narrative theory is also based on Somers and Gibson’s (1994) four core features of selective appropriation, relationality, temporality and causal emplotment, all of which have important

implications for the textual construction of the personal and public narratives about the Palestinian question and diaspora. Selective appropriation is the decision process guided by evaluative criteria to include or exclude, and to background or foreground, any narrative element, including events, experienced by the narrator. Relationality refers to the identification of those individual elements (events, characters, linguistic items, layout, imagery, etc.) that derive or change their meaning from the overall narrative context and design within which they are configured. Relationality is also inextricably connected to temporality, which refers to the embeddedness of narratives in time and space. The whole narrative takes on significance thanks to the distinct pattern of causal emplotment, that is, the thematic texture and “loci of enunciation” (Mignolo 2011) which the narrator is responsible for and engaged with.

In order to understand the performative language of aesthetic and political discourses, we also resort to van Dijk’s approach to CDA to examine how those artists and journalists compose their multimodal textualities in rhetorical terms, that is to say, what enunciation strategies are used, how they construct their identities as engaged narrators and how they strive to challenge dominant narratives. Crucially, the research analysis will take into account the following enunciation strategies: the use of ‘I’ facet for individual self-affirmation, which can contribute to reworking the way the narrator defines himself/herself and his/her ‘loci of enunciation”; the use of ‘we’ facet for expressing collective affirmation, which refers to the society and its institutions in general, raises a criticism towards them and provides alternative scenarios from within; the shift from ‘I’ to ‘you’ facets for interpellation, by which the narrator unlocks new modes of existence and understanding of the social world (appealing to the audience who may identify with or confront it); the construction of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ through discourse structures that directly entail attitude schemata like negative evaluations of ‘them’ and positive ones of ‘us’. As we will see later in this section, such enunciation strategies are built on specific pragmatic moves such as argumentation, rhetorical figures, evaluative lexical style, experienced storytelling, intentional emphasis on positive/negative actions and quoting credible witnesses, sources or experts.

Drawing on this range of critical tools, it is to be said that some case studies have been selected in order to reflect on all the discursive properties presented so far. The selection has been made on the basis of the heterogeneity of the texts collected for a small corpus consisting of multimodal and performative texts ranging from short docu-films to video and article interviews, from songs to manifestos, from

boycott petitions to blog posts. Despite the small size of the corpus<sup>8</sup> and the fact that only a selection of excerpts from those texts could be included in this study due to space constraints, we have attempted to cover a significant time span that stretches from 2001 to 2021. The main goal of the linguistic analysis of this corpus is to assess whether and to what extent common thematic connectors, narrative patterns and discursive properties related to the Palestinian question may be identified and problematized from a decolonial perspective.

The first case study is DAM, the Palestinian-Israeli historical group that chooses hip hop as a “defensive practice” (Bresheeth 2007, 144) for asserting a Palestinian cultural identity where such a history and existence is denied, as well as for resisting erasure, ongoing dispossession and occupation by Israel. Significantly, the group strategically and occasionally employs code switching in formulating their activist claims: according to their audience, they rap in Hebrew, Arabic and English, to transcend linguistic boundaries and to extend their influence beyond their immediate environment. In 2001 DAM released the song *Min Irhabi: Who's the Terrorist?*, which was downloaded over a million times, giving rise to their international exposure.<sup>9</sup> The politically charged song describes the military occupation that many Palestinians living in Israel face on a daily basis:

Who's a terrorist? I'm a terrorist?  
How am I a terrorist while I live in my country?  
Who's a terrorist? You're a terrorist!  
You've taken everything I own while I'm living in my  
homeland.

[Verse 1: Tamer Nafar]

Killing us like you killed our ancestors  
Go to the law? Why bother, my enemy  
You're the witness, lawyer and judge  
Upon the judge, my end begins  
Your dream is that we grow fewer and moreover that we are a  
minority  
Your dream is that the minority become a majority in the  
graveyards

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the corpus consists of twenty-five multimodal texts that have been collected and saved for the future development of this research.

<sup>9</sup> Those lyrics have offended some Israelis and prompted about two dozen protesters to push their way toward the stage here, yelling at Nafar and his fans and waving Israeli flags. Among them, Israeli Culture Minister Miri Regev, a former military censor, has publicly labelled the song as an act of violence and attempted to control artistic freedom.

Democracy? I swear you're Nazis  
And now while my agony is so intense you call me the  
terrorist?

[Verse 2: Mahmoud Jrieri]

Why terrorist? Because my blood isn't calm? It's boiling!  
'Cause I hold my head high for my motherland  
You killed my beloved, now I'm alone  
My family driven out, but I will remain and shout  
I'm not against peace, peace is against me.

The whole song proves to show an interplay and tension between personal and public narratives in the way that the rappers construct their thought-provoking narrative to respond to the Israeli violence against Palestinians. Indeed, the whole text shifts constantly from monoglossic to heteroglossic discourse, that is, from the 'I' subjective formulas to the 'you' enunciation strategies by which the rappers resort to the interpellation of the public to speak directly to an Israeli audience. From the very beginning, the performative power of the 'I' and 'you' relationship, which also seems to recall the oral process of the African-American call and response, addresses the dichotomy of 'terrorist' and 'victim' which was made particularly relevant in the wake of the Second Intifada. Specifically, in verse 2 the rappers provide an insight into the social, political and historical context of this song, making Somers and Gibson's categories (of selective appropriation, temporality, relationality and causal emplotment) particularly evident: the reference is to the massacre ("killed my loved ones" and "my family driven out") in the city of Al-Lydd that was occupied by Israeli Defence Forces in 1948 to make room for Jewish settlements, resulting in the current predominantly Jewish Israeli population. Historians have alleged that following the occupation, 426 men, women and children were killed by Israeli forces inside Dahmash mosque, while 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted from their land(s), displaced and expelled via force, now living as refugees in exile all over the world (Pappe 2006).

In DAM's verses, instead of accepting the notion that Palestinians are terrorists, the rappers' storytelling places this discourse under a historical lens and interrogates it by outlining the preconditions of settler colonization that they, as Palestinians, were born into. From the pragmatic point of view, their public counter-narrative is built on the semantic polarization and evaluation of the social relations that constitute colonizer ('you'/'my enemy') and colonized ('I'/'a minority'), debunking the dominant Zionist narrative according to which Palestine was the "land without a people for a people without a land" (Abdel Jawad 2006, 72). By reiterating the attitude schemata

in which the 'you' and 'I' relationship is topicalized throughout the song by asking "how am I the terrorist while I live in my country/you have taken everything I own", DAM critiques the racist, essentialist notion of "the Palestinian terrorist".

Such a decolonial move is linguistically performed by the presence of some distinctive thematic connectors, narrative patterns and discursive properties as those relating to occupation ('confinement', 'our land is disappearing', 'families driven out', 'you oppress'), cultural erasure ('destroy me', 'degrade us'), censorship ('you silence us'), struggle ('defend myself', 'we suppress our pain'), pain ('agony', 'anguish') and derogatory labelling ('terrorist', 'you're Nazis', 'a criminal') followed by a sequence of action verbs connoting the material reality of the colonizers' violent acts that 'have taken everything', 'killed our ancestors', 'let the kids throw stones', 'hit me and wept', 'buried our parents', 'killed my beloved', 'destroy me', 'erase my culture'. References to childhood ('the little kids throw stones', 'how many orphans you've created', 'orphaned children') as the most exposed and vulnerable victims of violence and conflict are also included in the song to contrast and refuse the crimes perpetrated against the Palestinians.

The second case study we want to discuss here as a powerful testimony of artist engagement is Shadia Mansour's song *Al Kufiya Arabiya*, released in 2011 and also known worldwide in its English translation as 'The Kufiya is Arab'. Shadia Mansour was born in London in 1985 but her parents are originally from Haifa and Nazareth. Influenced by Arabic performers such as Fairouz and Umm Kulthoum, she began her civic and public engagement by singing at Palestinian protest rallies as a child and became known in London's Palestinian community for performing classical Arab protest songs at an early age. Since she burst onto the hip-hop scene in 2003, she has also collaborated with activist artists like Palestinian hip-hop group DAM. In 2010 she joined the Iraqi rapper Lowkey and the American Jewish scholar Norman Finkelstein on his book tour to tell the truth about the Israeli military's attack on the Gaza Strip in 2009 (known in Israel as Operation Cast Lead and in Palestine as The Battle of al-Furqan), undertaking a cycle of performances of rap and spoken word poetry labelled Cultures of Resistance. This very label is likewise representative of the performative and symbolic creativity of Mansour's lyrics, along with the convergence of her music and her political activism that makes herself feel part of a 'musical intifada' against the occupation of Palestine, conservatism and oppression of women. Additionally, just as DAM has made its translingual choice when rapping in Hebrew, Arabic and English, so Mansour switches from English as her native language to Arabic, which represents a symbol of her heritage and a shared cultural communication to reach the Arabic-speaking world.



The political dimension of her music set in the interplay and tension between tradition and modernity is also embodied by her choice to perform in traditional Palestinian clothing. Here, the aim to preserve cultural identity against homogenization and the overt sexualization of women in hip hop can be read as Mansour's decolonial move toward participatory music activism, as strongly emerges from the song *Al Kufiya Arabiya* (The Kufiya is Arab).<sup>10</sup>

[Verse 1:]

Good morning, cousins.  
Come and honor us with your presence.  
What would you like us to offer you, Arab blood or tears from  
our eyes?  
I believe that's how they hoped we would greet them. Look how  
they grew confused when they realized their mistake.  
That's how we wear the kufiya, the black and white kufiya.  
They began playing a long time ago by wearing it as a fashion  
accessory.  
No matter how creative they become, no matter how they  
change its color, an Arab kufiya will remain Arab.  
Our kufiya: they want it. Our culture: they want it.  
Our dignity: they want it. Everything that's ours: they want it.  
No, we won't be quiet for them. We won't permit them.  
No, no. It suits me.  
Thank you. The thing isn't theirs.

From the discourse analysis viewpoint, Mansour's song also blends personal and public narratives in the way she denounces cultural appropriation against the American-made blue-and-white colored Arab scarf with Stars of David on it. Following the narrative process of selective appropriation, Mansour's experiential storytelling draws on the construction of 'we'/'our' facets that relate to the collective consciousness ('that's how we were the kufiyia') and to the affirmation of collective cultural identity ('our kufiya', 'our culture', 'our dignity', 'our heritage', 'our history'), reflecting the belief that the Israelis are occupying more than land. However, the thematic connectors of collective consciousness and identity are also constructed along the lines of temporality and relationality, which make the Israeli presence textually enunciated by the ongoing appeal to the 'they'/'their' facets ('they began playing', 'they want it', 'they mimic us', 'they're greedy for Jerusalem', 'the thing isn't theirs'). By re-echoing Mignolo (2011), the "Palestinian locus" of Mansour's enunciation shifts to the

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<sup>10</sup> The translation was provided by <https://allthelyrics.com/>.

personal 'I/'my' facets in the second verse, which proves to be very dense from a pragmatic viewpoint. Here, the artist's self-affirmation is combined with a sequence of such rhetorical strategies as personification ('we're the civilization', 'the kufiya is my identity'), metaphor and similitude ('my tongue stabs like a knife', 'my words are letter', 'I'm like the kufiya'), and hyperbole ('my earthquake trembles uncontrollably'), all of them drawing on symbolic vocabulary that, on the one hand, serves to incorporate the historically meaningful image of the keffiyeh within the Palestinian imagination and identity in the face of ongoing struggle and, on the other hand, aims to debunk its urbanization and commodification due to imitation by the Israelis.

The last case study which is worth analyzing here is an article selected from the Middle East Eye, an independent digital news organisation covering stories from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as related content from beyond the region. It was founded in 2014 and was launched through a call<sup>11</sup> specifically addressed to "citizen journalists" (Baker, Blaagaard 2016), who are encouraged "to read between the lines and take stories one step further rather than simply follow the official narrative". Such a statement is a sign of the extent to which MEE's journalist production has been built on the aim, among others, of giving visibility to non-mainstream mediatic narratives with respect to the Palestinian question. To this end, we want to mention and briefly examine here an online article published in 2021 by Devin G. Atallah, Lana Andoni and Hana R. Masud, who have engaged decolonizing narrative and community-based participatory approaches to critical inquiry, primarily within long-term partnerships with communities in Palestine, among others. The article, entitled "Love Letters to Palestine: In Search of Decolonial justice",<sup>12</sup> proves to be a significant testimony to decolonial mediatic commitment, through which personal and public narratives are legitimized in the wake of a participatory and activist storytelling set, as follows:

Palestine exists, and our existence is our resistance. We survive and work towards healing, in spite of the weapons of mass deconstruction that target our everyday lives with all the resources of colonialism, because we are - as activist Assata Shakur reminds us in her powerful autobiography - "weapons of mass construction". [...] Palestinians live under intolerable circumstances, with Israel enabled to perpetrate settler-colonial, racially supremacist violence. Standing against racism means standing against settler-

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**11** The whole call is available here: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/calling-all-citizen-journalists>.

**12** The article is available here: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/palestine-love-letters-search-decolonial-justice>.

colonialism. It means standing with decolonisation – and where there is colonisation, there is also decolonisation. Where there are Palestinians, you can also find our *intifada* attitude, our dignity and our decolonial love, never too far away. Over the past several months, our decolonial love has been on full display in unparalleled ways. [...]

All know we can come together to bridge our forced separations and renew our decolonial struggle. Palestine is not alone; the letters we received echo this decolonial love. We received dozens of love letters dedicated to Palestine from our families, friends and colleagues. [...] Colonisers tell us that Palestine is dead and buried, but we know otherwise, and we are moving towards more aliveness. Like our radical Black sisters and brothers, we Palestinians are time-travellers too. [...] To Israel, and to many European and Euro-American power brokers, we are easily invisibilised – killed, detained, deported, erased – not because we are weak, but because we are colonised. And in our colonial condition, we belong to all the peoples of colour of the world – especially those who have been unpeopled. [...] Rather, the required remedy is love and anti-racist resistance to colonisation. The medicine is decolonial justice, including concrete political action to end not only the deadly bombing raids, but the entire Israeli occupation of Palestine and the siege of Gaza.

From a discourse analysis viewpoint, the authors' voices and experience is projected onto the collective value of the 'we'/'our' facets that coincide with Palestine, Palestinians and their *'intifada'* attitude'. The power of such identifications is also reinforced by the use of a pragmatic strategy typical of the language of journalism, that is, to quote credible witnesses in the article ("activist Assata Shakur", "psychiatrist Yasser Abu Jamei", "Adrienne Maree Brown"), thereby making the narrative itself more reliable and participatory. As for argumentation, the article also envisages a sort of decolonial thinking which can help to disentangle the distorted narratives produced by the colonizer as elicited by the statement "Colonisers tell us that Palestine is dead and buried", as well as emphasized by the repetition of the historicized and emplotted adjective 'decolonial' associated with such thematic connectors as 'struggle', 'love' and 'injustice'.

Therefore, the lines through which the journalists most reflect their decolonial claims are the ones recalling the power of colonial domination ("To Israel, and to many European and Euro-American power brokers"), the effects of the pan-coloniality of knowledge ("we are easily invisibilised – killed, detained, deported, erased"), as well as of epistemic racism ("and in our colonial condition, we belong to all the peoples of colour of the world") that has implemented the political-cum-intellectual logic of coloniality. According to the par-

ticipatory journalists' viewpoint, a decolonial narrative approach is what emerges from the reading of "dozens of love letters dedicated to Palestine from their families, friends and colleagues" as a way to practice what Mignolo describes as "epistemic disobedience" against the oppressive way of knowing and imagining (Mignolo 2009, 159).

#### 4 Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to discuss the extent to which unaffiliated citizens endeavor to give themselves a voice and thus produce counter-discourses and counter-publics (border culture), thanks to the powerful role of such mediatic artist engagement practices (cyborature) as hip hop and independent journalism. Among them, the impact of public discourse and dissent exerted by such practices with respect to popular resistance during the First Intifada has reminded us that collective singing and dancing, along with participatory newstories, during that period opened performative spaces for the integration of new communities, bodies and ideologies by contemplating new directions and new possibilities in the national movement. Giving voice to the subaltern experience of dispossession by performing (in) public spaces has also brought to the fore the issue of the role of those discursive practices through which unaffiliated citizens express themselves and the question of how hip-hop artists and independent journalists interact with and construct public spaces as activist actors. In a time when the public and social activism spheres are discursively interlinked, the politicization of performance in terms of artist engagement of/by such groups does not come as a surprise.

Accordingly, our contribution has also focused on the public activist value of such "experience movements" (McDonald 2004) enabled by cyborature through which performing citizens have posed new issues of solidarity, authenticity, autonomy and accessibility by enacting participatory decolonial and diasporic politics. Throughout the analysis of our case studies, we have investigated those linguistic tropes, thematic connectors and discursive properties that make the mediatic artist narratives created by DAM, Shadia Mansour and the Middle East Eye news source emblematic testimonies of postcolonial publics and engagement, thus conveying the subversive power of their discourses in terms of aesthetic-political appeal. As a result, we have identified and problematized issues of resistance, collective consciousness, resilience, self-determination and decolonization as common thematic connectors featuring their artistic and journalistic production as a site of a border culture, i.e., a site of teaching, learning and shaping alternative understandings of the Palestinian question, while struggling for liberation.

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## **Section 3**

### Postcolonial Activism





# Dislocation and Creative Citizenship: Romanian Diasporic Artists in Europe

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**Abstract** This chapter evaluates the role of spatial, historical and ideological dislocations in the creative citizenship performed by Romanian diasporic artists working from the perspective of post-colonial subjectivity. Dan Perjovschi, Mircea Cantor, Mădălina Zaharia and Ileana Pașcalău reclaim public and digital spaces to provide a new regime of visibility and a reflexive, critical and performative re-examination of history, memory and the tension between the individual and the collective.

**Keywords** Diaspora. Memory. Post-socialism. Romania. Visibility. Visual art.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Postcolonial Dislocations. – 3 Diasporic Dislocations. – 4 Perjovschi, Cantor, Zaharia and Pașcalău. – 5 Conclusion. Introduction

This chapter analyses the role of dislocation in the work and activism of four Romanian visual artists in Europe. Like other contemporary Romanian artists whose work is infused with a “very strong sense of philosophical and ideological engagement” (Ben Tufnell cited in Heterodox 2012), Dan Perjovschi, Mircea Cantor, Mădălina Zaharia and Ileana Pașcalău use the themes of alienation, historicization, memorialization and counter-politics to give visibility to marginality and subalternity, themes that sit at the intersection of Eastern European and migrant/diasporic identities and artistic performances. The

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I would like to thank my friend and long-term collaborator Marius Lehene for helping me develop the initial ideas for this chapter. Marius Lehene is Professor of Drawing at Colorado State University and a Romanian dislocated artist.

first two parts of the chapter engage, respectively, with the postcolonial and diasporic experiences of Romanian artists working in Europe, to show how their creative citizenship, which has both ideological qualities and affective sensibilities, emerges from experiences (both individual and collective) of historical rupture, disputed memories and political contestation. While these may be the shared experiences of artists throughout Eastern Europe, I argue that the artist constituency discussed here provides the unique perspective of creative elites who grew up and trained under one of the most repressive Eastern European political regimes, lived through a brutal post-socialist transition and matured as successful artists while working ‘in-between’ and thus dislocated historically, ideologically and spatially. This perpetual marginality gives rise to a specific political acuity accrued in clear instances of creative citizenship. The latter part of the chapter documents this process through an analysis of the work and the digital engagements of Perjovschi, Cantor, Zaharia and Pașcalău.

The term ‘dislocation’ is the preferred umbrella term used in this chapter. The alternative, ‘displacement’, suggests forced movement or separation from a place, but disregards processes through which social beliefs and value systems are dislodged by historical upheavals. The other possible alternative term ‘translocation’ refers to separation and movement but lacks the power to connote traumatic rupture. Dislocation, on the other hand, not only suggests a sudden break, but the ‘locus’ from which one is dis-located can go beyond a place and can connote a locus of culture or a locus of memory, thus providing a more accurate understanding of the negotiations and contestations that follow a symbolic, rather than just physical loss. ‘Dislocation’ also alludes to the perpetual change and in-betweenness of the post-socialist period.

## 1 Postcolonial Dislocations

Eastern Europe’s postcolonial position is far from straight forward. As debates among scholars affiliated to the Postdependence Geographies in Central and Eastern Europe (PostCEE) research network prove, Eastern Europe may appear privileged in comparison to postcolonies in the Global South. Yet, Ottoman, Habsburg and Soviet colonialisms have left persisting inequalities and legacies of oppression. Additionally, debates about the dominance of “the West” within European hierarchies and its role as the new colonizer are not uncommon. As Ginelli (2020) observes, Eastern Europe is defined by an “uncomfortable ‘in-between’” that comes from claiming European-ness and whiteness, while at the same time blaming Western Europe for its colonizing tendencies. This blame assignation is often accom-

panied by Eastern Europeans “victimizing their ‘peripheral whiteness’” (Ginelli 2020).

Eastern Europe’s uncomfortable in-betweenness derives from what Țichindeleanu (2011) calls “passing”: Eastern Europeans appear to be white and therefore advantaged, except for the Roma. Yet “passing” is not always guaranteed, since in Western Europe the Eastern European migrant is often racialized as “not quite white” (Țichindeleanu 2011). Easterners may be therefore “European”, but not privileged. Claiming an advantage that postcolonial counterparts from the Global South might not have (e.g., whiteness), Eastern Europe has still to overcome its peripheral, subaltern experiences. The East is often too close to Western Europe “to do its own thing” but, at the same time, too far away to simply assimilate (Fowkes, Hailbronne 2019, 508). The current crisis of democratization in some countries in Eastern Europe can thus be understood as a rejection of a new colonial power (Europe/the European Union) by an anti-Western counter-elite who monopolizes nationalism and populism to reject yet another imposed “model” (Krastev, Holmes 2020).

Eastern European political ambiguities, often evident in the work of many artists and intellectuals, can thus be seen as a consequence of “in-betweenness”, with whiteness both an advantage and a burden and with colonial legacies justifying to some extent postcolonial claims but at the same time looking like self-victimization when compared to non-white post-coloniality. Yet, such ambiguities are elaborated from an acute sense of marginality and dislocation. In this sense, symbolic geography has always mattered for Eastern Europe – space and place have often been ideologized and racialized, to some extent. To this, time dislocations have added another layer of ideological significance. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ of historical periods which are in Eastern Europe ideologically distinctive, further enhance the sense of dislocation from individual and collective memories, which are often disputed and prone to reinterpretation.

Artists and intellectuals from the East are thus compelled to think in-between the ‘posts’: post-socialism and post-colonialism (Chari, Verdery 2009). Both ‘posts’ have developed their own practices and theories, the first taking a more temporal approach, as Chari and Verdery observe, the other a more critical and reflexive one. Yet both require a re-historicization of the past and its legacies, a “reclamation” (Fowkes, Hailbronne 2019, 501) of the past to own the present. As diasporic artist Marius Lehene pointed out in a 2017 interview for the online culture magazine *Insula Europea*,

the trauma of communism has not yet been dealt with by the Romanian society at large and, as such, it still looms large over the nation and that includes artists [...] I think it is this lived-reality [of the post-socialist transition] as well as the memory of com-

munism that explains the propensity for dark subject matter and dark humour in both Romanian visual arts and cinema after 1989.

If we consider in-betweenness and marginality, Eastern Europe has a lot in common with the Global South (Fowkes, Hailbronne 2019, 498), especially if we interpret 1989 to be a moment of “self-determination” (Fowkes, Hailbronne 2019, 508). However, reclaiming the past and self-determination do not preclude exclusion, as Ponzanesi and Blaagaard (2011) remind us when discussing the way practices of exclusion can simply become more insidious. Țichindeleanu (2011) too points out that by ignoring people’s diverse historical experiences, both anti-communists and critics of the West are guilty of the colonial tendency to subsume people’s real lives into ideological frames and thus elide their affective experiences. In this context, the work of Romanian visual artists becomes even more essential to decolonization. The role is one of questioning imposed hierarchical assignments and highlighting the role of the artist as a creative citizen endowed with self-reflexivity, aware of spatial, temporal and ideological impositions. The artists, mindful of their intellectual burden of reflexivity, understood in spatial, historical and ideological terms, become thus creative citizens, working from the perspective of post-colonial subjects.

Previously, the creative citizen has been described as an advocate for change, a “pro-social contributing participant in the life of the body”, or community, aiming to revive democracy (Liu 2017). Apart from lacking specificity, this definition is weakened by the assumption that we should take democracy for granted, uncontroversially, when creative citizenship should include, in fact, the ability to question everything. For Zamenopoulos et al. (2016, 103) creative citizenship amounts to everyday “creative acts” that generate community engagement. In this definition the focus is on the community, not the individual, although it does acknowledge the role of the expert in generating “expert (social) capital” through the connective relationship between experts and non-experts (121). Zamenopoulos et al. are right to see creative citizenship as being founded on context (spaces), practices and social capital (127), yet the community spaces referenced in their research, with their localized practices and small-scale social capital generation, are spaces that seem rather static and banal in comparison to the border changes, systems in transition and cultural shifts defining Romania in its postcolonial period. The citizen moulded by the creative practices they describe also lacks the political and organized incisiveness ‘citizenship’ would presuppose.

My definition of creative citizenship is therefore closer to Baker and Blaagaard’s definition of citizenship, as extra-territorial (counter) citizenship exercised by “*unaffiliated citizens*” (Baker, Blaagaard 2016, 15; emphasis in the original), in our case artists or art collec-

tives, “reclaiming” public and digital spaces away from “institutionalized” corporate agendas (1). I argue that the experience of multiple dislocations provokes reflexivity and leads to creative citizenship that has a reflexive, critical and performative quality in the work of Romanian diasporic artists. Citizenship here is used not in its constitutional legal understanding, but is seen as a bundle of unique, expert interventions aiming to enhance and transform the everyday and the common place through new regimes of visibility. This new visibility is achieved through disruption, which opens new political spaces and invites reaction, reflection and mobilization. Such “performative interventions” help effect (political) change, while creating new publics in the process (Baker, Blaagaard 2016, 16). One important characteristic of the work of many Romanian diasporic artists, including the four discussed in this chapter, is taking artistic interventions outside the traditional space of the art gallery and into public spaces, including digital ones. This spill-out challenges everyday practices and confronts publics with new regimes of visibility coming from the usually unseen and unheard margins.

Visibility is achieved through disrupting the *status quo*, a process which mimics the recurrent dislocations and disconnections experienced by postcolonial artists through regime transition and migration. These disruptions can therefore be understood as “hacktivist practices” (Leurs 2018, 266) which are not just defined by interruption, but also subversion, bringing together the personal, the political and the performative. If “hacktivism” is “social justice-oriented intervention” through digital practices from below (279), one can see the work and “performance”, digital or otherwise, of Romanian diasporic artists, as a set of postcolonial intellectual interventions operating through disruption, dislocation, reflexivity and historical sensibility. Their “anti-colonialism” or “counter-colonialism” operates at the porous interface between resistance and mainstreaming. Disruption may be a temporary interruption, but its surreal quality creates new and potential connections and meanings rendered visible through the artist’s creative performance.

## 2 Diasporic Dislocations

Postcolonial dislocations are essential in the elaboration of creative citizenship, but so are migration and diasporic experiences. It can be, of course, argued, that all artists are dislocated or, to some extent, ‘exilic’. As Edward Said maintains in one of the *Reith Lectures* recorded in 1993, being an intellectual in metaphysical exile, and therefore, “being unsettled and unsettling others”, is the preferred position. Intellectuals, argues Said (1993b), need to be uncomfortable, to be outsiders defined by dissonance and dissent, exiled from acceptance and

privilege. Exile, in this case, is not deprivation but rather freedom, because being on the margins offers the advantage of an unconventional perspective. Visual artists are by the nature of their artistic practice “dislocated”. However, diasporic experiences can add another layer of “uncomfortable” dissonance with the majority and the mainstream, another opportunity to give visibility to the obscured.

Like postcolonial experiences, displacement similarly incites “double consciousness” (Gilroy 1993; du Bois 1995) in perception and reflection. Diasporic aesthetic sensibilities are thus created from a “contrapuntal” perspective (Said 1993a), which allows the artist to critically reflect both existing systems of oppression, and the counter-perspective of the oppressed. This duality of consciousness comes from the experience of being both an outsider and an insider, same but also “other”. Rushdie’s (1992) “broken mirror” metaphor best describes this new acuity coming from an alteration of reality which questions the “normal” mainstream perspective. Before Rushdie, Foucault (1984) would use the mirror metaphor to draw attention to the importance of *espaces autres*, places of contradiction that interject Western’s established relationship with real or sacred spaces. In-between diasporic spaces formed by a multitude of perspectives through dislocation are, in Foucauldian terms, “heterotopias” or “counter-spaces” formed through “mixed”, “joint”, simultaneous experiences. Diasporic experiences of in-betweenness can elicit uncomfortable feelings. In this sense, mixed spaces formed and inhabited through the experience of otherness and difference, as would be typical of diasporic artists, give visibility to what society finds uncomfortable and prefers to remain unseen. This is not dissimilar to what Freud ([1919] 2003) describes as “uncanny” or *unheimlich*, which is again founded on the idea of doubleness, of the “contrapuntal”, of the “broken” mirror whose shards reveal new angles of reality we are uncomfortable with.

Creative citizenship in the work and digital expressions of Romanian diasporic artists, emerges thus form an intentional goal to redistribute the “sensible”. Coming from Jacques Rancière’s (2011) philosophical arsenal, the redistribution of the sensible means shifting focus onto aspects of reality that usually remain invisible, to disrupt the established hierarchy of visibility. It is a deliberate and therefore political alteration in what is perceived. The ability to “change the cartography of the perceptible” seems to come more easily to those artists who have experienced marginality, doubleness and in-betweenness. Their “collective enunciation” (Rancière 2011) can thus be conceived as creative citizenship since “art contributes to shifting sensibilities and as such every aesthetics is also a politics and vice versa” (Lehene 2017).

Romanian born US based artist Rozalinda Borcilă similarly observes that experiences of dislocation create the right conditions to

“subvert the landscape and grammar of migrant/citizen visibility” (Borciță, Marciniak, Tyler 2014). The regimes of visibility belonging to the inherited “apparatus” (Agamben 2009) are thus reconfigured: we see more, we see differently, we see what was there, but not immediately visible. Consequently, art disrupts and then reconfigures the existing “apparatus” or “dispositif”, the established knowledge system that controls our perception of the world.

The advantage held by Romanian artists is that their work speaks to the intersection of both postcolonial and diasporic dislocations. When his work began to attract interest from critics and collectors, Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, who works and lives between Berlin and Cluj-Napoca, explained: “I like the difference between the official story and the personal perspective” (in Gartenfeld 2011). The difficulty of assigning meaning to lived history because of the dissonance between official discourse and personal experiences, is a theme that permeates the work of many of Ghenie’s similarly dislocated contemporaries, among which Radu Belcin, Răzvan Boar, Rozalinda Borciță, Mircea Cantor, Aline Cautis, Dumitru Gorzo, Marius Lehene, Flavia Pitis and Alex Voinea. Their work speaks of the duty to produce a counter-history through creative citizenship, giving visibility to unsettling, traumatic and occasionally absurd phenomena.

Beyond its politics, the work of these Romanian artists also recalls a process of “stratification” (Deleuze, Guattari 1980) of experiences. Of course, multiple experiences naturally create layers that express both the conscious and the unconscious. Yet, artists can use these stratifications to provide a visible system, where each layer is given sufficient significance and thus becomes visible. Stratification is therefore not just ideatic or symbolic, but also material: artists overlay print screens, collages, paints and other materials. This is apt because “diasporic memory is a necessary layered one” (Chamberlain 2009). Their work becomes an actual but also a symbolic stratum of individual and collective experiences “screens that absorb the shock, filter and diffuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm” (Hirsch 1998). Following Hirsch, herself of Romanian origin and a key contributor to the understanding of postmemory, we can conceive of art itself as postmemory, an embodiment of rememberings further destabilized by spatial, temporal and ideological dislocations. Yet instead of seeing them as unreliable, we can conceive of these rememberings as essential politically reflexive interventions that disrupt inherited regimes of visibility by proposing new meanings, by giving visibility to hidden layered memories experienced at the level of primary emotion.

### 3 Perjovschi, Cantor, Zaharia and Pașcalău

Although born in different decades of the socialist period (from the 1960s to the 1980s), the artists whose work is discussed here, belong to the post-socialist (postcolonial) constituency of dislocated artists whose work is layered, reflexive, conceptual and openly political. They all work with a variety of materials and visual expressions, which erupt beyond the traditional canvas into public areas and occupy an array of architectural and public spaces, from shops and theatres to colonnades, pavements and galleries. The theme of dislocation is common to all, understood to be, as already conceptualized in this chapter, spatial, temporal and ideological. Also shared among the four artists is the ability to disrupt the existing “apparatus” and sensibility regime using methods that go beyond the objects and works of art, spilling-over into the realm of the political. Aside from the artwork, their political insurgence is apparent in some of their digital incursions, specifically the use of social media by artists like Dan Perjovschi and Ileana Pașcalău.

Perjovschi (b. 1961, Sibiu-London, New York, Bucharest) is a veteran of the Romanian and international art scenes. His black on white cartoon style socio-political drawings, calligraphic performances and commentaries embody insurgent political art. His work has tackled the post-socialist moral crisis of the Romanian society (*Meanwhile What About Socialism?*, 2016), but also post-colonial themes such as individual rights, racialization, surveillance and state control. From populism to global warming (*The news after the news*, 2011; *Between the lines*, 2012; *Europa, Sorry We're Closed*, 2013; *Drawing Protest: From Museum Walls to Facebook Walls and Back*, 2014; *Drawing Your Attention*, 2020) Perjovschi gives visibility to news that media misrepresent or obscure. Using humor, newspaper collages and visual deconstruction of events such as the annexation of Crimea, street protests in Hong Kong, racial tensions in the United States and the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, he re-writes the news to highlight ideological manipulation and the collusion of elites in silencing dissent. His work forces us to look beyond the obvious while his activism invites resistance. In *Time of monsters* (2018), a wall collage come commentary of the Trump period, Perjovschi underscores words such as “fear”, “future”, “fake”, “war” and “resist”, drawing attention to the unsettling effect of political distortion. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (*Virus Diary 2020-22*) and the invasion of Ukraine have continued to spin his career-long thread tackling the themes of power, inequality and collective violence, while *The Nightmare It Is / The Nightmare It Was* (2020) provides an analysis of the most recent US presidential campaign and its controversies. His work re-memorializes thus traumatic moments to provide a contrapuntal reading of their significance. His creative citizenship stems from postcolonial



subalternity, allowing him to insert the legacies of post-socialism into the global story of globalization, neoliberalism and elite control.

The real story within the silenced story approach also supports the work of the youngest artist represented here: Mădălina Zaharia (b. 1985, Sighetu Marmăției-London). Like Perjovschi, she gives visibility to hidden methods of control by retelling and rearranging reality to disrupt conformist narratives and representations. In *Comfy Seating and Internet Banking* (2017), two flip-back old cinema style seats are placed in the middle of the gallery space. One has the image of a calculator stuck to the bottom. This incongruity provokes thinking about the tension between art and neoliberalism, particularly the tendency to see culture and creativity as data and profit. Using installation, photography, film, performance and sound, Zaharia subverts the ordered appearance of popular culture, drawing attention to the harm of convention. She forces us to question what we know and bring (reflexive) disorder to order.

In her short film *Public Figure* (2021) Zaharia transfers the techniques of embodied poetry to the “fractured” process of filmmaking. According to the film’s promotional material:

Poet Ryan Ormonde is carefully observed and re-imagined by Zaharia’s cinematic eye. Through this exchange, the poet and the onlooker are collectively staging a particular sense of ‘publicness’.

The film disrupts our expectations of linear narrative, colour and sound, while the filmmaker chooses to highlight or digitally enhance certain parts of the image the audience sees. It is a clear artificial intervention reminding us of the presence of the filmmaker while all the while she attempts to give affective visibility to the poet (Ryan Ormonde) and the words spoken. It is also an instance of layering, whereby several narratives and a multiplicity of possible interpretations seem to sit in tension. Highlighting parts of the screen is a strategy that draws attention to our own inability to spot the apparatus which drives our (inherited) expectations. It also speaks of the role of the artist as an enabler of visibility, able to reveal hierarchies of power and manipulation. Meaning is therefore layered; there are different perspectives at play.

Looking from another angle to reveal a different perspective is also typical of Mircea Cantor’s work. Cantor (b. 1977, Oradea-Paris) uses video, photography, performances and installations to tell compounded stories, one of which being migration. *Stranieri* ([2007] 2016) looks at this theme from different angles. The installation containing the bread and salt of Romanian hospitality, usually offered to visitors, reminds us that strangers need hospitality, yet traditions are often disrupted by newcomers. Cantor provides a contrapuntal reading, by marrying the perspective of the stranger with that of the indigenous subject, whose reality is suddenly modified, impinged upon.

In his recurrent installation *Chaplet* (2007-18), Cantor uses his fingerprints to draw the appearance of barbed wire on surfaces that include gallery walls, aeroplane windows and Adidas trainers. Cantor reminds us that biometric identification at border controls is a system of oppression that translates the individual into data. State power (detention) and attempts to challenge it (protest) are depicted in *Am I Really Free?* (2020), while the slabs of concrete with carvings of knotted ropes of *Supposing I Could Hear that Sound. Now* (2015), reiterate the post-colonial themes of repression and incarceration. In these works, Cantor makes visible the ugly face of state violence against the individual.

Engaging with uncomfortable themes is also typical of the fourth artist discussed in this section, Ileana Pașcalău (b. 1985, Caransebeș-Berlin). In *Dis-places/Oculus* (2020), she references women writers and artists (e.g., sculptor Camille Claudel) incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals at the crossover between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Psychiatric breakdown and the theme of women and madness are represented by pairs of glasses inscribed with words (e.g., “lone-liness”) from an Emily Dickinson poem, which the viewers are invited to rearrange in order to write a new meaning or perhaps tell their own story of isolation. Incarceration means living inside one’s head, the only place of escape from collective oppression. It reminds us of the treatment of women in the name of ideology, which Pașcalău counteracts with feminist iterations. Photographs of the artist wearing the “scold’s bridle”, a metal cage for the head used in England between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries to punish “troublesome women”, together with tattooed silicone tongues in *Tua culpa* (2019), speak of attempts to regulate women and their bodies. Another major theme, death and decay in relation to beauty, is represented by the photographic self-portrait *I Looked My Best Tonight* (2019). In it, the artist wears an ammunition belt stocked not with bullets, but black lipsticks. As Pașcalău comments on her website: “My works tend to remind the moments of collective fear and social abuse regarding the female body, often viewed as a peril that needed to be ‘reined’”. As viewers, we are meant to feel uncomfortable about the systematic violent regulation of women’s bodies.

The (two ‘posts’) post-colonial and post-socialist stances exhibited by the four Romanian artists is revealed in their ideological engagement with the politics of late capitalism/neoliberalism, globalization and feminism. Their engagement strategy is one of giving visibility to what is obscured (systems of dominance, compliant media, immigration, human rights) via a “broken mirror” device. In addition, all four artists are performing historical excavations to problematize the relationship between individual and collective memories or comment on the burden and opportunity of history and tradition.

Perjovschi’s impromptu drawings respond to current events, but in doing so he shows us that history in the making is always open to

interpretation. In *Virus Book* (2020) he scribbles two words over the pages of a newspaper: “DATA-DADA”. In Perjovschi’s interpretation, “history” as told by the press, is a mere absurd manifestation of a universal joke whose workings need to be revealed: supposedly verified information is “dada” and therefore nonsense.

Much of Cantor’s earlier work is underpinned by childhood memories, which in an Eastern European context can be both comforting and disturbing. Stuffed animals and birds, incongruously placed within the gallery space, evoke unsettling rites, a phantom memory. *Arch of Triumph* (2008) brings us a wooden carved gate, traditional for the Northern region of Maramureş, in Romania. In Cantor’s rendition, it is covered in 24 karat gold, to highlight the value of tradition and disappearing craftsmanship. It does not only speak about globalization concerns, but also recalls communism’s rewriting of history and its dismantling of tradition for the purpose of enforced industrialization. Cantor often returns to traditional materials (hemp, wool, clay, bronze, wood) and practices (wood carving, weaving) but infuses them with contemporary meanings. At the 2022 Kathmandu Triennale he exhibited traditionally woven tapestries which unusually contained dates. The numbers highlight the tension between timeless objects that are passed down through the family (carpets and tapestries are usually part of dowries at weddings) and the immediacy of specific times and dates. The stratification of the weaving process itself mirrors the addition of numbers and dates, one by one, as history unfolds. It recalls the ideological stratification but also dislocation of Eastern European histories.

Although belonging to a younger generation of dislocated Romanian artists, Zaharia’s creations are concerned with the same processes of remembering and misremembering, visibility and invisibility, observable in the work of Perjovschi and Cantor. In *Preliminary thoughts* (2016), pink gesture-like interventions made of steel appear on white walls, sometimes alongside more traditional paintings. They remind us of layered memories, constantly being replaced and modified, a tendency of post-socialism to re-ascribe meaning and modify collective memory to suit ideological interests. These material gestures on the walls of the gallery cannot be predicted, their placement defies expectation and fixity, thus alluding to unexpected traumatic change. They also force us to look where we usually do not, towards the actual corners of the gallery space, but also, indirectly, towards the symbolic margins from which hacktivism originates.

Like Cantor, Paşcalău recuperates the past to give it new meaning. In *Like a Stain of Breath Upon a Mirror* (2010), transparent funerary clothes are projected onto a green landscape in a re-interpretation of Romanian women’s funerary customs. The archaeological excavation performed by the work brings to the surface an object from the past that seems to have lost its bearings, its original meaning. Yet

its presence in the here and now gives it new power and political relevance and is not dissimilar from Cantor's reprocessing and repurposing of ancestral tradition. In Pașcalău's case the new meaning is the posthumous ideal of beauty and the fusing of life (green foliage and grass) and death (ghostly cloth).

References to the past are therefore recurrent in Pașcalău's work. *Narratophilia* (2020), a sculpture series containing silicone rubber, raw meat and worms, is dedicated to the victims of homophobia in Romania and highlights the criminalization of homosexuality, which survived until 2001. The body parts moulded in rubber are tattooed with fragments from the poetry of Oskar Pastior and Walt Whitman. The raw minced meat and chicken hearts recall, according to the artist's website, the "cruel penal system in communist and post-communist societies". Pașcalău's recent (2020-21) participation in a collective exhibition organized at the Museum of Queer History and Culture in Bucharest, is also emblematic of the activist role assumed by dislocated artists. Opened in 2020, the museum claims on its web page: "We make history"; "We are our own historians. We interrogate, explore, rescue and present the past belonging to a community outside the law until the end of 2001". Pașcalău performs a similar role of resignification: the artist's work is inscribed by history and therefore reflexive of history; it brings marginality into the public space, and it gives visibility to that which was hidden and at one time considered disturbing. She thus recreates feelings of intrusion, fear, confinement, guilt, punishment, collective violence and transgression to give her work a socio-political dimension.

None of four artists are afraid of signalling their activism by constantly reminding us of their presence, almost like an interjection, an interpellation. Like Perjovschi and Cantor, Zaharia disrupts expectations through incongruence; her intrusions while dislocating familiar objects or intervening into unusual spaces conjure the presence of the artist as performer and hacktivist. The remaking of traditional spaces, such as simple white walled rooms, by adding mismatched drawings or materials, not only provides a comment on the disjointed link between memory and representation, but changes the regime of visibility, drawing the artist and the issues she cares about forward into the spotlight. The artist is consequently refashioned as a social commentator in the process of exhibiting the work. She moves from marginality to centre-stage mirroring Zaharia's own gradual surfacing within the art world.

In working with the themes of politics, power and resistance, Cantor too puts himself, the artist, in the middle of the art, whether suggestively or literally, using personal objects and body prints. Everyday items, the artist's Romanian passport in *Ad litteram* (2007) or a pair of trousers in *Itching Pocket* (2007), claim the visual space for the artist himself. Taken out of context, these mundane objects as-

sume new meanings through the artist's interventions. His trousers sprouting soil and nettles would be reminiscent of *arte povera* if it was not for the Armani label. Audiences can thus consume, aesthetically, a version of the artist whose creative performance assumes a political stance critiquing the condition of Romanian migrants in Italy. His creative citizenship, like for the other artists discussed here, derives from the fault line between now and then, here and there and the things that lie in-between. Not by accident Cantor claims to "Live and work on Earth", while refusing to pinpoint his exact location and favouring dislocation.

Cantor's digital presence is equally slippery. His 11,500 followers on Instagram and 1,500 on Facebook (at the time of writing in April 2022) can survey the photographs of his artwork, interspersed with the occasional symbol of traditional Romaniness, given a new embodiment: Lego heraldry, painted Easter eggs, traditional handwoven carpets with contemporary motifs. They provide layers of meaning to the artist's engaged citizenship and are visual glimpses of a bigger (Romanian) collective story. There is no commentary on Instagram and just some sporadic explanations on Facebook. His audience seems to react with plenty of likes, hearts and approving comments, that echo the artist's pride in salvaging his people's heritage. Cantor makes the occasional visual appearance to remind the viewer of the role of the artist as creator, leaving the work to speak for itself albeit politically about alienation, oppression, collectivity and memory. His insurgent interventions give thus visibility to what we should see, but we usually do not, either because it is purposefully disguised or hidden, or because we find it disturbing and uneasy.

The most obvious hacktivist persona belongs to Perjovschi, whose work is designed to provoke the viewer into seeing beyond the established reality (the apparatus). The strength of his approach lies in the ephemeral nature of his work: at the end of the exhibition the walls, columns or windows are whitewashed or cleaned to provide a new canvas for the next artist. Yet the moment of intensity his work provides, is also a moment of clarity, of visibility that forces us to look. The fleeting nature of the art is commensurate with the artist's in-betweenness as a dislocated subject. His artistically performing body becomes an extension of the artwork, underscoring his political commitment: the artist as actor within history.

Perjovschi has long been interested in digital media and has used social media as an extension of his creative citizenship. On Facebook, where he has 30,000 followers (at the time of writing in April 2022), he proclaims himself to be an artist and journalist. Perjovschi indeed provides graphic design and written content to the Romanian publication, *Revista 22*. Named after the date the Ceaușescu regime was overthrown and run by a group of intellectuals under the banner of the civic organization Group for Social Dialogue, *Revista 22* offers inci-

sive political commentary and takedowns of public figures. Not dissimilar from the publication he supports, Perjovschi's online posts include drawings and cartoons that respond to issues and events, interspersed with a critique of current politicians and political commentaries on minority rights, environmental protection, corruption, censorship and the role of the diaspora. He was a promoter and supporter of the #REZIST protests against corruption that rocked Bucharest in 2017 and 2018, which had a large diaspora participation. His mobilizing engagements are part of the post-colonial duty to reveal the *unheimlich*, in this case the ugliness of corrupt regimes. They stem from his ability to occupy, as a dislocated artist-journalist, the counter-space of alterity. Similarly, his Instagram page (8,000 followers in April 2022) describes him as: "Dan Perjovschi: living and working in Sibiu, Bucharest and the rest of the world". The assignation implies that dislocation may be a choice, the privileged position from which incursions against systems of oppression can be made. While there is no commentary, the images (and hashtags) tell their own story. On 9 April 2022, for example, his tongue in cheek cartoon reflecting the improbability of peace in the wake of Russian crimes in Ukraine, is accompanied by hashtags that spell "Putinwarcriminal", "Russianarmywarcrimes" and "Stand-WithUkraine" and become therefore advocacy and activism.

Paşcalău, like Zaharia, Cantor and Perjovschi, gives visibility to the artist as activist and public intellectual through her actual presence within performances, self-portraiture, personal objects or gestural interventions. She places no barrier between personal and public life, art and the everyday. Her creative citizenship reveals once again the ability to rewrite the past to understand the present. In her case, this is enacted through a post-colonial vision that has feminist lenses. Paşcalău is active on Instagram (570 followers in April 2022) and Facebook (1300 followers in April 2022), where she extends her commentary of the artist's role within history beyond the gallery space. Through photography, we can see the artist at work, and her research and production processes are revealed. We can observe her soldering in her studio (Instagram, 21 February 2019) or sculpting stone in the garden (Instagram, 27 August 2018). We are told about her research of eighteenth century prints and their "smart women" (Facebook, 27 October 2021), as well as library research visits (Facebook, 1 October 2021). The resulting visual art thus loses its mystery and becomes a historical and political document. The accompanying social media that gives additional visibility to the artwork becomes simply a metatextual commentary, which amplifies and expands the art across multiple real and digital spaces. When posting photographs with her art during exhibitions (Instagram, 24 June 2019) or in her studio (Facebook, 16 April 2020), she makes visible the presence of the artist in relation to the work. The artist is not an abstraction, merely subsumed within the content of the work, but a

reflexive presence, a public intellectual choosing to speak through creative citizenship.

#### 4 Conclusion

Through an analysis of four Romanian diasporic visual artists active in Europe at the present time, this chapter highlights some of the complex processes at work in postcolonial contexts, from, in this case, an Eastern European perspective. Dislocation, which is a characteristic of postcolonial and migratory experiences, is amply illustrated by a preoccupation with the past, the individual and artist's role within history, recurrent re-memorialization and the excavation of uncomfortable feelings from the primary level of affective engagement. Art produced from a position of marginality gives visibility to hidden trauma, disrupts existing 'systems' of oppression and subverts inherited 'regimes' of visibility.

The "redistribution of the sensible" in the work of these Romanian diasporic artists is carried out by experimenting with incongruous material combinations, from words and everyday objects (a pair of trousers, a lipstick, a chair) to silicone rubber and raw meat. These atypical, almost outrageous, material associations expose the irrationality of governments and the oppression of inherited ideological systems, by giving visibility to the political subtext and inviting reflexivity on the part of the viewer. Furthermore, by using references to the past, such as childhood memories, these artists reveal experiences that might have occurred at a primary level. Re-memorialization becomes an act of historical excavation that helps buried memories to resurface and help counterpose those rehearsed memories that are used as forms of collective tyranny.

Perjovschi, Cantor, Zaharia and Pașcalău may belong to different generations, but they share the experience of being brought up during the socialist regime and having been displaced geographically, historically and ideologically. This shared knowledge endows them with reflexivity and the ability to elaborate forms of creative citizenship which are unshackled from institutional constraints and expand beyond national anchoring. Creative citizenship emerges from processes of emancipation, an acute awareness of the artist's role in relation to history and the ability to make new political claims and enunciations that challenge and modify current sensibilities and existing regimes of perception. While the art they produce seems to be a continuation of media representations of historic events, past and present, its role is very much critical, revealing the incongruities and absurdities of trying to fix the meaning of events.

Digital incursions via Facebook and Instagram, especially for Perjovschi and Pașcalău but also Cantor to some extent, provide oppor-

tunities for expanding the relationship between art, history, culture and society across multiple platforms of interactions. While it is impossible to be sure, because of the lack of self-assignment and the hybridity of online spaces, their followers seem to be similarly displaced individuals who consume art with the same relish shown while reading and discussing current events. Digital media provides therefore a metatextual role of debate, criticism and amplification.

The creative citizenship exhibited in the work and digital presence of many contemporary Romanian diasporic artists, “hacks” the public space of the gallery, the screen or the wall, liberating it from institutional and ideological constraints and providing a contrapuntal and therefore political interpolation to existing systems of oppression. Holding a broken mirror up to society is made possible by the specific experiences of post-coloniality typical to post-socialism.

In this chapter I argue that experiencing multiple dislocations leads to enhanced reflexivity and creative and critical citizenship. Creative citizenship becomes a bundle of unique, expert interventions aiming to enhance and transform the everyday and the common place through new regimes of visibility. Creative citizenship is thus manifested as a suite of postcolonial intellectual interventions that operate through disruption, dislocation, reflexivity and historical sensibility. The anti-colonial practices of this artist constituency operate therefore at the interface between resistance and performance.



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# ***The Walk: A Participatory Performative Action Across the Borders of Europe***

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**Abstract** The chapter analyses the artistic action *The Walk*, performed across 9 borders by an international network of artists and citizens in support of asylum seekers. At the core of the performance is a giant puppet representing a little girl who walks 8,000 km from the Syria-Turkey border to the United Kingdom. Through this participatory march, *The Walk* attempts an act of spatial and urban decolonisation, designing an alternative public space. This paper analyses the case study by applying a practice-led approach combining Performance Studies and Migration Studies, and focusing on three main issues: the performative praxes of spatial politics, the relational process of creation, and the theatrical languages for a counter-narrative about migration.

**Keywords** Theatre and refugees. Performance and spatial politics. Borders. Participatory art and public spaces.

**Summary** 1 On practising the Centrality of Borders. – 2 “Let’s Have a Walk!”: A Relational Practice of Creation. – 3 Amal: An *Empty Machine* for Silent Counter-Narratives about Migration. – 4 From Gaziantep to Manchester: A Performative Challenge to Borders.

## **1 On Practising the Centrality of Borders**

*The Walk* is a participatory artistic action performed across 8 countries over 4 months (July–November 2021) by an international network of artists, activists and citizens in support of young asylum seekers. At the core of this travelling performance is a giant puppet (3.5 metres tall) representing a young Syrian refugee called Amal, walking

over 8,000 km along one of the migration routes from the Syrian border to the United Kingdom across Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. At each stop of her journey, Amal was welcomed by local artists and communities with street performances, concerts, shows, poetry actions. During the long parades, Amal was accompanied by supporters, children, activists, passers-by, immigrants, as well as by a virtual public following the live stream on social media. These diverse audiences weave a network of mutual references around the political body of Amal, which represents a major type of intersectional discrimination based on origin, gender, and age.

The project has been conceived by a group of artists who gravitate around Good Chance, a theatre founded in the migrant camp of Calais and trained in working with and for asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup> After numerous artistic experiences with migrants and non-citizens in transit in England and France, they brought together a group of artists, leading producers and collaborators, to carry out this ambitious international project. By applying a process of participatory and relational performance involving hundreds of citizens and cultural institutions across various countries, *The Walk* has realised a collective artwork that challenges the European borders and proposes a new transnational and post-colonial spatial thinking.

This travelling action is focused on the key question of borders which traverses a range of disciplines, including anthropological and sociological theories (Agier 2016; Brambilla et al. 2015; Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) and artistic and theatrical practices.

Since the experimentations of conceptual Border Art in Mexico,<sup>2</sup> which proposed a new paradigm for reimagining the study of art from its margins (Sheren 2015), borders have become a crucial site for political artistic research and practice.

In recent years, performative actions involving non-citizens in transit have been significantly increasing and stimulated critical interpretations and theoretical analyses (Balfour 2013; Jeffers 2012; Wilmer 2018). Performing in in-between spaces has become an aesthetic and programmatic synthesis in which the threshold is conceived as a space of enunciation and negotiation through interactions; a relational and dynamic site; a third space of presence (Bhabha 1994). Beyond any dualism, the notion of in-between space pushes to-

**1** Good Chance was founded in 2015 by two playwrights, Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, who established a temporary geodesic dome in the migrant camp of Calais. This space was intended to offer a free creative and imaginative zone for marginalised people in order to support their mental freedom and agency, through various activities ranging from improvisation, music, art, sport and cinema. <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/>.

**2** Since its conception in the mid-1980s, at the US-Mexico border, Border Art has developed a range of practices and theoretical positions that address the issues of borders, surveillance, belonging and origin.

ward new structures of creation and new political initiatives toward an expansion of non-material spaces.<sup>3</sup>

Good Chance is one of the theatre groups which has cultivated this artistic path focused on spatial praxes, through a constant practice of the “centrality of the border” (Agier 2018). Since its first artistic action carried out in the “hypertrophic border” of Calais (Agier 2018),<sup>4</sup> Good Chance has tried to shift public and media attention towards these invisible and liminal places -camps and reception centres-, neither inside nor outside European borders and traversed by a growing number of people from various origins (Ruffini 2019).<sup>5</sup> The travelling performance *The Walk* is a development of this direction, amplifying the theatrical public space and reversing the role of the centre and the margins. In mapping the route of the performance, the artists and producers considered the symbolic importance of each stage. *The Walk* crosses the gateways of Europe and the heart of Fortress Europe, entering its institutions. Stops in refugee camps and meetings with urban migrant communities, alternate with passages through the mediagenic heart of Europe, across its core institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels, its historic capitals, its cultural and religious temples [fig. 1]. Just as building a theatrical dome in Calais meant declaring the gateways of Europe as *urbem*, so the appearance of Amal in the heart of the continent symbolises the epiphany of a new transnational citizen (Balibar 2003). From Calais to Rome, *The Walk* attempts a spatial and urban decolonisation of the European imaginary about migration.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter analyses the case study, by employing a practice-led approach combining Performance Studies and Migration Studies. Besides conducting a qualitative study through non-directive interviews with artists and collaborators, the research has applied participant observation and creative research methods during the the-

<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s, various artists have developed the concept of in-between space or interstitial spaces, under the impulse of the postcolonial notion of Third Space elaborated by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

<sup>4</sup> In 2015, the “Jungle” of Calais was the largest unofficial migrant camp in Europe, in which up to 8,000 migrants were living.

<sup>5</sup> Agier considers refugee camps and borderlands to be laboratories of an “ordinary cosmopolitanism”, composed of new subjects who are both included and excluded (Agier 2016). In addition to Good Chance, many theatre groups are experimenting with intercultural performing languages in migrant camps, on the Balkan routes, in the Greek camps and in reception centres in Italy, France and Germany, as well as in Palestinian diaspora camps. These artistic actions are also common in Africa, in particular in the Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Congolese, Kenyan and Malian camps.

<sup>6</sup> The artistic practice of spatial decolonisation is particularly developed in South Africa, where performance and theoretical reflections are deeply linked to apartheid segregative urbanism. Cf. Boulle, Pather 2019 and Ruffini 2022.



**Figure 1** Amal dancing in Saint Peter's square, Vatican City, September 2021. Photo by the Author

atrical journey across Europe and the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The analysis focuses on the following main points: the performative praxes on spatial politics; the relational process of public creation involving artists, refugees and citizens; the theatrical strategies adopted for a counter-narrative about migration.

## 2 “Let’s Have a Walk!”: A Relational Practice of Creation

The idea of a walking performance across borders came from a talk among collaborators of Good Chance, wondering how artists could support the cause of asylum seekers. David Lan, former artistic director of the Young Vic Theatre in London, proposed to create an act that reproduced the journey of many millions of people. “Gradually this idea grew out of hearing about refugee people walking” (Lan quoted in Hemming 2021). The founders of Good Chance, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, added the idea of the giant puppet representing a young refugee, “too big to ignore”. The size of the project prompted them to involve skilled collaborators such as the renowned director and producer Stephen Daldry<sup>8</sup> and the film producer Tracey Seaward.<sup>9</sup> For the creation of the puppet, they turned to Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, the founders of the South African company Handspring Puppet, who are considered among the leading masters of puppetry.<sup>10</sup> Their contribution was crucial to the project, not only for their craft mastery but also for their artistic approach. Handspring Puppet Company has a long history of activism and artistic struggles in South Africa. Since the dark years of apartheid, they have used puppets as a tool for dealing with divisive political issues, managing to reach large audiences. By collaborating with William Kentridge, the company has created some of the most politically influential and significant works of post-colonial theatre.<sup>11</sup> For decades,

<sup>7</sup> This paper is a partial outcome of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project research entitled “Playing at the Gateways of Europe: theatrical languages and performative practices in Migrant Reception Centres of the Mediterranean Area”. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 894921.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Daldry also directed *The Jungle* in 2017, a play about the Calais camp performed by the Good Chance Ensemble and co-produced by the National Theatre and Young Vic.

<sup>9</sup> Tracey Seaward is widely known for the success of the London Olympics Opening Ceremony in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Handspring Puppet Company was founded in 1981 in Cape Town.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the plays *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), *Faustus in Africa!* (1995).

they have investigated, even theoretically,<sup>12</sup> the possibilities offered by puppets as a medium for overcoming the prejudices of the audience and stimulating their critical reflection. Their artistic experience is inseparable from their political and social practice aimed at articulating the unspeakable, knowing that “it is difficult to shut up a puppet”, as they say (Jones 2021). Kohler and Jones enthusiastically accepted to join the project *The Walk*, as an ideal conclusion of their career. Thus, their expertise in facing new social challenges through participatory art indelibly marked *The Walk* by directing its perspective and positionality.

Amal’s performance is also defined by the decisive role of the Palestinian artistic director Amir Nizar Zuabi who accompanied the whole journey, guiding live the dramaturgical action.<sup>13</sup> Formerly a long-time associate of David Lan, Zuabi suggested leaving room for spontaneous, unpredictable audience interactions, trusting in improvisation. He also launches the idea of the “acts of welcome” created in public places by communities and artists, mostly with a migratory background. These acts are at the core of *The Walk* and constitute the structure around which urban parades are improvised.

For this reason, during the project preparation, it was decided to collaborate with six regional producers deeply connected to the territories crossed by the performance.<sup>14</sup> Knowing the cultural environment, these producers were able to build a grassroots network, involving local artists and connecting them to design the final path. The network gradually expanded to include various intersectoral collaborations with refugee associations, NGOs, activists and schools.

Even before being a performance, *The Walk* is a relational practice of citizenship in support of asylum seekers. The entire project is grounded on relationships and proposes a methodology of creation, communication and realisation based on increasing dialogical exchanges. Hundreds of institutional and non-institutional partners formed the frame that supported and shaped this ambitious project in logistical, artistic and financial terms: municipalities, funders, charities, volunteers, theatres, museums. This network initiated a series of transversal collaborations between international partners, refugee and non-refugee communities who had never previously worked together. “A corridor of friends”, as defined by David Lan (Lan quoted in Hemming 2021), which represents one of the main legacies of the project.

<sup>12</sup> In collaboration with the University of Cape Town, UTC.

<sup>13</sup> During the performances, Zuabi communicated through an audiophone with the puppeteer inside Amal, who had limited visibility.

<sup>14</sup> Recep Tuna in Turkey, Yolanda Markopoulou in Greece, Roberto Roberto and Ludovica Tighi in Italy, Amaya Jeyarajah Dent in the United Kingdom, Claire Béjanin in France, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium.



With the aim of networking, the organisers set out a digital strategy to be delivered before, during and after the theatrical journey. A digital platform in six languages was created to connect participants and to provide an accessible online archive of the virtual acts of welcome, videos and performances created worldwide.<sup>15</sup> The digital space has also offered the opportunity to work with people and artists who could not cross European borders, in particular Syrian artists, who play a crucial role in this project. Meanwhile, an education programme has been developed for schools, students and teachers, consisting of digital workshops and creative learning activities.

In order to reach different generational groups and geographical areas, the digital strategy applied multiple channels in addition to the domain .org, such as the social media channels Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (which is also used to stream online events) and some dedicated apps: an audio guide created by refugee artists, the interactive cartoon *Little Amal*, and the virtual 8,000 kilometres marathon *Run for Amal*.<sup>16</sup>

When the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic forced a complete rethink of the project, the digital strategy provided a major tool for the participants to meet online and work out solutions with all the partners. Many small local realities joined the project at this stage, while several national institutions remained suspended, locked up in the aphasia into which the COVID-19 had thrown a main part of the theatrical world. Despite the unfavourable conditions for a travelling international performance, the organising team decided to react at a time when borders were hardening even more.<sup>17</sup> The logistics were a challenge in the context of continuously changing restrictions on public gatherings, border closures, quarantines, passes and documents. The design of the route across 9 borders included an assortment of alternative plans. Improvisation was applied as an implementation methodology allied to the strategic ability of the producers and artists. Most of the collaborators who revolved around the project had worked in migrant camps or reception centres and were well-trained in uncertainty and instability. Indeed, in camps the creative framework is shaped by the spatial and temporal liminal conditions: all the critical elements of theatrical practices (time, spaces and actors) are shifting. By creating and working in this transitional and ephemeral frame, these artists developed an approach rooted in improvisation and instant actions (Ruffini 2019). When they joined *The Walk* project, this helped them to

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.walkwithamal.org/acts-of-welcome/>.

<sup>16</sup> The digital space was also used to raise funds for the action and to support grassroots associations working with young refugees.

<sup>17</sup> The risk was partly offset by other considerations: the long closure of theatres, the scarcity of new productions, the limited number of cultural events, gave to *The Walk* a wide international visibility.

manage the frequent schedule changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They conceived a performance juggling with impermanence and unpredictability, trying to transmute them into artistic resources. In *The Walk*, the chance is considered a poetic and creative element. And this is precisely one of the greatest artistic qualities of this ambitious undertaking that involves a huge number of civic and cultural partners in a complex concatenation of actions across 8 nations and over 65 cities.

### 3 **Amal: An Empty Machine for Silent Counter-Narratives about Migration**

Across the 8,000 km journey, the only fixed element of the travelling performance is the body of the puppet Amal. This giant puppet representing a young refugee defines the theatrical space around which a network of artists, citizens and audiences is gathered and connected. The choice of placing a giant silent presence at the centre of attention is a stage technique that reverses the traditional direction of the relationship between performer and audience. The main interest of *The Walk* is not the performance of Amal, but the reception of the public. Amal is not performing, she is walking and witnessing the “acts of welcome” created by local actors or improvised by the audience.<sup>18</sup>

Amal does not speak. Like other Handspring puppets representing subaltern or racialised people facing post-colonial contexts, she observes. The main activity of the puppet is focused on the complex mechanics of the eyes that are controlled by the puppeteer inside it. Amal is mute but has enormous and mobile eyes to watch the communities she is passing through, and to see how local citizens are or are not welcoming her.<sup>19</sup> She receives invitations, gifts and refusals by authorities and mayors, she takes hits and attacks. With the enigmatic serenity of a mystical epic statue. It is certainly no coincidence that her creators, the Handspring, are fascinated by religious processions of self-moving statues. Having collaborated with Sogolon artists in Mali who craft traditional and sacred giant puppets, Handspring has elaborated an ontology of the puppet:

Why is it that audiences are so fascinated by this performance of life? I think that the answer lies with our primordial religious impulses. A belief in the life and agency of all things, including the

<sup>18</sup> As Joe Murphy, the founder of Good Change, says: “The Walk gives us the possibility to re-perform the act of welcome that we failed to offer to asylum seekers” (Murphy 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Throughout *The Walk*, the journey of Amal was filmed constantly by a crew that recorded her journey and the reaction of the public. The videos were shown on the social media channels Instagram and Facebook.

dead, originated with early humans in Africa, from whence it spread to and became part of many religions across the world. This belief in agency is deeply engrained in our psyches. (Jones 2009, 255)

Although *The Walk* is far from conveying a spiritual or religious aura,<sup>20</sup> the reaction of audiences amid amazement, emotion and astonishment suggests a pseudo-magical role of Amal's apparition. Her mere presence questions and unleashes different responses, which are at times affected by the local political situation.

Like Tadeusz Kantor's puppets of *Umarła klasa*,<sup>21</sup> burdened by post-war Jewish shadows, Amal deals with the ghosts of European consciousness by carrying with her 35 million migrant children, many thousands of whom disappear every year. Kantor's notion of the "Theatre of Death" (1977) is perfectly embodied by this puppet which, as one of its creators said, "belongs to the people who are no longer there" (Jones 2021). Not forgetting that: "A puppet is by its very nature dead" (Jones 2009, 254).<sup>22</sup>

Working on the notion of presence, absence and perception, Handspring focuses a part of their artistic, aesthetic and political action on pointing at the invisible in order to make it appear in the viewer's mind, without describing it. As Kentridge says about his collaboration with Handspring:

It's part of understanding that the world is something constructed, rather than *given*. [...] The bedrock of puppetry is a demonstration of how we make sense of the world. Puppeteering makes apparent things that we know but don't really see. (Kentridge 2009, 198)

That is why, contrary to what was initially envisioned by Good Chance, Handspring Puppet decided to avoid any realistic or evocative representation of the migratory condition, especially in its vulnerability and hardship. Inversely, the puppet created by Handspring is a theatrical system that drives the viewer into a participatory and authorial position, by setting his imagination in motion.

With the aim of bringing the public into the foreground, Handspring conceived a device for relationships, rather than a character.<sup>23</sup> As Jones states:

<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Kohler states "We are grappling to understand Amal's religious dimension" (Jones 2021).

<sup>21</sup> The *Umarła klasa* (*The Dead Class*) is a piece created by Tadeusz Kantor in 1975.

<sup>22</sup> These absences are evoked during the journey through the tributes offered in the places of transit where migrants often die, such as the Greek shore of Chios, the Bri-ançon mountain crossing and the coast facing the Channel.

<sup>23</sup> Amal is operated by a puppeteer walking on stilts and controlling "the harp", a complex tapestry of strings that animate the face, head and eyes, while two puppeteers

Amal is not real. She is artificial and you can see the puppeteer inside. She is an *empty machine* that invites the audience to fill the gap through imagination. (Jones 2021)

The suggestion of the empty machine, quoted by Jones, recalls the well-known theatrical notion of *empty space*, introduced by the English director Peter Brook, at the end of the 1960s (Brook 1968). The definition evokes the space left to the viewer to complete the work, to travel the distance separating their experience from the artistic act. Likewise, the physical and performative “emptiness” of Amal invites the public to re-create the reality. As a Handspring collaborator, Gerhard Marx, says:

It is within the audience that the puppet comes to life, rather than in the hands of the puppeteer. (Marx 2009, 247)

The active role of the spectator’s gaze is performed by the continuous and deliberate denial of fiction. The mechanisms within Handspring puppets are not hidden [fig. 2]. The skin of the puppet is transparent or open and reveals the interior apparatus manipulated by the puppeteer, in order to show how the illusion works, “providing a poignant reminder of the puppet’s ‘constructedness’”, as told by Gerhard Marx.

A common-sense assumption is that the puppet-makers would do all in their ability to hide the construction of the puppet in order to give the puppet the illusion of independence of movement and thus to sustain the illusion of the puppet having come to life. But Handspring reminds us in every aspect of the puppet’s making, that the puppet is constructed and, by implication, that the puppet as an autonomous being is a fictional construct. (243)

By declaring the fictional, in a quiet Brechtian way,<sup>24</sup> Handspring gives the viewer the agency to fulfil the work. The incessant dynamics between the visibility of the mechanisms and the invisibility of the creation completed by the spectator builds the play performed by each participant and by the public as a whole.

The puppet is animated through an almost-choral event, an entanglement of object, action, performance and various subjectivities. (245)

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control each arm, in an extraordinary work of coordination. Eight puppeteers alternated along the journey, some of them with a migration background.

**24** The distancing effect (or V-Effekt) coined by Bertolt Brecht is applied by disclosing and disrupting the fictive and constructed contrivances of stage illusion. In the case of *The Walk*, the mechanism of continuous alternation between the imaginary dimension and the emotional dis-identification is rooted in the viewer’s perception.



**Figure 2** The puppeteer (left) is preparing to put on the puppet, while a member of the staff is checking 'the harp'. London, October 2021. Photo by the Author

The aesthetical device of the *empty machine* is also a response to the ethical criticalities concerning the representation of refugees. Through this non-fictional tool which has to be filled by the viewer's imagination, *The Walk* refuses any narrative or descriptive frame that is often adopted by theatrical and performative productions with/about migrants. As a growing scientific literature is pointing out (Jeffers 2012), most of these artistic works are focused on tragic tropes and refugee stories<sup>25</sup> usually written and directed by non-migrants. This testimonial imperative raises a series of ethical questions about representation and authorship that risk falling into a racialising approach. On stage, the refugee is often forced into the role of telling a biography of pain in front of the audience, waiting for the possibility of existing. He/she is worth as much as his/her story of traumas

<sup>25</sup> In particular, in the last decade, a number of theatrical plays have focused on narrative frames and the rhetoric of 'giving a voice' to refugees.

and persecutions, performed by a linguistic act that dangerously recalls the asylum interview required to obtain asylum status. Without agency, this role re-proposes a complacent variant of recycled victimising and stigmatising stereotypes.

Instead, *The Walk* presents a reverse personification of the asylum seeker, which does not illustrate a story. Amal walks across Europe and looks at us as citizens. She does not negotiate tragedy for a compassionate welcome in return. Her silent presence prompts the audience to critically consider the positionality and the perspective of their gaze. *The Walk* is an unspoken counter-narrative about migration shaped by the reactions and imaginaries of its multiple publics. In some way, it is a theatrical concretisation of the sociological notion according to which the migration issue is a mirror that reflects the contradictions of the societies involved (Sayad 1999).

#### 4 From Gaziantep to Manchester: A Performative Challenge to Borders

On 27th July 2021, *The Walk* started in Gaziantep, on the border between Turkey and Syria, where thousands of Syrian refugees settle. When the puppeteer wore his stilts and Amal's skeleton for the first time, the street was filled with hundreds of Syrian children and the astonishment captured the artists even more than the audience. Basil Jones tells:

A woman told us that she had been travelling for 5 hours with her children to show them the giant puppet of a Syrian refugee girl. (Jones 2021)

The woman's determination to show her children a giant superheroine representing them, impressed Jones since one of the central issues of his artistic work is based precisely on projective identities. Having worked extensively with children who have uncertain or negative self-representation and live in racialised townships afflicted by Aids, drug addiction and alcoholism,<sup>26</sup> Handspring has developed a practice of empowerment through puppets, conceived as "emotional prosthesis" in situations of trauma and suffering (Taylor 2015).

The reaction of Syrian refugees in Gaziantep was a confirmation that Amal could become an emotional prosthesis and be brought to life by the audience

<sup>26</sup> Handspring Trust has been running a project in the marginalised area of Barrydale (South Africa) for ten years. The project intervenes in environmental apartheid, by designing new relational spaces and re-weaving bonds between the divided settlements.

who wants her to be alive. The puppet has a metaphorical nature: it belongs to all the people watching. [...] Every refugee comes with their story. [...] Many of them say: I am Amal. (Jones 2021)

Surrounded by children who wanted to talk with Amal or shake her hand, the artists reacted by opening up to this engaging and strong audience. The stop in Turkey revealed lucidly that *The Walk* would be a dramaturgy of encounters that the artists could neither control nor predict.

It also became apparent that the public reaction was incessantly shaped by political events. And while in Turkey, which hosts around 3 million Syrian refugees, Amal was warmly received by empathetic crowds composed of refugees, in Greece the reaction was quite different. The body of Amal became a political battleground in the harsh political debate on migration that polarised the country, and which was exacerbated in those days by the violent declarations of Nikolaos G. Michaloliakos, the leader of the far-right party Golden Dawn. In the town of Larissa, Amal was shouted at and even assaulted by neo-fascist agitators and right-wing protesters throwing food and stones at her and at the children gathered there. Labelled as “Muslim” by some media, (although there are no elements to indicate any religious affiliation),<sup>27</sup> Amal was banned by the religious authorities of the orthodox monasteries of Meteora, since her presence would have contaminated the holiness of the place.

And, while the debate on social media became fiery, the local political propaganda saw the performance as a good opportunity for visibility. Thus, after a visit to the migrant camp of Katsikas, Amal became the focus of a riot in Athens involving fascists, anti-fascists and the police, which forced the crew to cancel the planned event in Metaxourgio. The producers decided to have Amal appear on a roof terrace, from which she could be seen by a crowd of supporters. The reaction on social media reaction was quick: under the Facebook post announcing the cancellation of the Matxourgio event, the comments in Greek overflowed and someone wrote: “It appears that Greek right-wing extremists are scared of a doll”.<sup>28</sup>

In Italy, the potential tensions were dampened thanks to the unexpected meeting with Pope Francis who has always shown great sensitivity to the cause of migrants, by carrying out many iconic actions.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> This proves that the Puppet works as a mirror device: its shapes and features are defined and interpreted according to the viewer’s perspective, which fills the “empty machine” with his imaginaries about migration.

<sup>28</sup> *The Walk* (3 September 2021), Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/walk-withamal>.

<sup>29</sup> The Pope’s first pastoral visit was in Lampedusa, producing a huge media echo. Afterwards, he visited the migrant camps of Lesbos.

The image of the Pope shaking Amal's hand gave massive visibility to the project, ensuring consensus and affiliations. Suddenly several cultural institutions that had previously been difficult to contact were now asking to get involved.<sup>30</sup>

The Italian dates were accompanied by a certain general sympathy due to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan which was covered by the national media with news and images of people trying to flee the country via Kabul airport. While European ministers were scrambling to inform citizens that they were working hard to save a few hundred Afghans affiliated with embassies, the support toward (certain types of) refugees was increasing.

In Milan, besides meeting the main theatrical institution, the Piccolo Teatro, Amal was welcomed by Emergency, an NGO that has been providing free medical care in Afghanistan for twenty years. Meanwhile, the founders of Good Chance, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, were making contact with Afghan refugee communities and, shortly afterwards, the organisational team activated its network to make an urgent call on the British government to grant safe passage to Afghan artists, writers and filmmakers. Their open letter with the organisation Index on Censorship was published in the newspaper *The Times*, on 10 September 2021.

In France, the arrival of Amal was anticipated by the press ready to cover the theatrical action, after the echo aroused by the previous events and by the iconic images of the Pope welcoming the puppet in the Vatican. The producer who took the relay was Claire Béjanin, a brilliant performing arts producer best known for her remarkable work with asylum seekers (she is the founder of Good Chance France). The more than 40 events performed in France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland were even followed by newspapers historically hostile to migration issues, such as *Le Figaro*.

The route organised by Béjanin shows strong attention to space, by alternating performances in the executive centres of Europe (the Council and the Parliament of Europe) with events of emblematic significance at the continent's gateways (borders, ports crossings). Evolving out of constantly shifting scenarios and impacted by pandemic shutdowns, political sensitivities and logistics, this leg of the journey was not easy. In Briançon, which is one of the harshest mountain border crossings used by people seeking to pass from Italy to France, the authorities did not allow Amal to cross the border. And in Calais, where Good Chance founded their first dome in the migrant camp, the city's mayor refused to access the beach, just a few days before the performance.

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**30** In Rome, Amal also met Baobab Experience, a dynamic community of migrants, activists, volunteers, supporters, that provides assistance to homeless people.



Béjanin felt it was important to assure these resonant steps of the migration journey, wanting to honour the people who try to overtake this dangerous route and the associations of volunteers which provide aid to them. So she found a way to organise, in Briançon, a treasure hunt with the village's children in search of the objects left behind by refugees on their way through the mountains. In Calais, Béjanin arranged a welcome punctuated by speeches and poetic interventions with hundreds of Calais residents, artists, and human rights advocates. Students and children accompanied Amal with a swarm of kites made with the scraps of the tents of migrants destroyed during the dismantling of their camps by the police. Finally, after a series of refusals by various mayors of coastal cities, the producer found a municipality, Bray-Dunes, that was ready to host an event in front of the water border of the Channel.

The focus on borders is a crucial factor in this part of the journey, which is characterised by events for large audiences, such as Amal's landing on the shores of Marseille escorted by different boats with the collaboration of the NGO SOS Méditerranée.

*The Walk* visited the gateways of Europe and burst into the heart of Fortress Europe, entering its institutions. At the European Parliament in Brussels, Amal delivered 10,000 letters written by children from around the world. At the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, she met the President of the Assembly and other parliamentarians who took advantage of the media opportunity to offer her a copy of the European Convention on Human Rights detailing the rights that would protect her during her peregrination.

Yet, according to the perspective of inversion that characterises *The Walk*, the centre is at the edge. Amal highlighted the peripheral places in which many associations operate, providing medical care, legal assistance and food to asylum seekers. As well as the associations supporting the rights of refugees, Amal visited the rallies of struggle too: in Brussels she stopped in the Church of Saint John the Baptist where a group of undocumented migrants was on hunger strike, demanding the regularization of their status. This proximity creates a complex confrontation between artistic work and reality, between performance and existence. As David Lan tells:

Two women were holding up a sheet of paper, which said "We are also human beings". I felt a pang thinking "Good God. We're going to bring a puppet in here. This is real, what we're doing is a play". (Lan quoted in Gentleman 2021)

The encounter with this extreme strategy of resistance empowered the artistic action. Aware of this, the producer repeatedly underlines the condition of privilege experienced by the troupe on the trail of the migratory path:



**Figure 3** The Walk in London, October 2021. Photo by the Author

We've got to be really clear about that. The route we're taking is a route which refugees have taken, but we stay in hotels, we have passports. (Lan quoted in Gentleman 2021)

The arrival in the United Kingdom, in October 2021, was the highlight of the journey. Most of the institutions that had spent years collaborating on the project are based here. In London, a large public participated in the events organised by the Shakespeare's Globe, the National Theatre, the Southbank Centre and the Somerset House. In Trafalgar Square, a crowd made up of citizens, tourists and refugees converged to celebrate Amal [fig. 3]. The enthusiasm was augmented by an urgent political topic: in those days, the government was debating the Nationality and Borders Bill, which planned to punish people who enter the country illegally, with jail sentences of up to four years. A law that would detain Amal. Therefore, the English leg of the journey stood out for the support given by the associations for the rights of asylum seekers, marching and shouting slogans such as "Refugees are welcome here" and waving flags from asylum seekers' countries of origin. In Oxford the parade was followed by a man carrying the sign "Mimmo Lucano is innocent", referring to the trial of Domenico Lucano, the ex-mayor of Riace in Italy, who was sentenced to 13 years for alleged wrongdoing in the management of hospitality projects for refugees. The presence of immigrants and refugees pa-

rating in the centre of the ancient university city is significant. As Oxford's step shows, the march became a space of self-representation for migrants, acting as a spatial decolonisation of urban centres.

After a series of meetings through Oxford, Birmingham, and Coventry, the last stop was in Manchester, a city of historical working-class movements. In a spectacular final event, organised with the collaboration of the Manchester International Festival, the various communities of the region surrounded Amal. The participation of LGBTQ+ activists, celebrated drag queens, antiracist collectives, schools, musicians and footballers from local clubs opened up a network much more articulated than those seen in other cities, which had often been polarised into artistic intervention and social cooperation.

In Manchester, *The Walk* officially ended but, in the meantime, Amal has come to life, becoming a media icon for the cause of unaccompanied minors. The puppet continues to appear as a symbol on many subsequent occasions. A few days later, she was in Glasgow at Cop26, the UN Climate Change Conference 2021, standing alongside the Samoan activist Brianna Fruean to highlight the impact of the climate crisis on women from the Global South. Her presence at the Gender Day plenary, hosting indigenous activists and politicians, pointed to the close link between climatic change and migrant justice.

In December, Amal visited the British parliament to protest the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill, while Good Chance's social media channels asked to email a member of the House of Lords to demand safe routes for refugees.<sup>31</sup> Later, in May 2022, during the war in Ukraine, Amal marched across the Ukrainian city of Lviv and at the Polish border where Ukrainians were displaced.<sup>32</sup>

From her first step in Gaziantep, Amal has never stopped and her action has continued to reframe the narrative about migration in various ways. The attention to mass media and social media platforms, the production of an evocative iconography of Amal standing in the mythical sites of the European imaginary, the involvement of celebrities as ambassadors,<sup>33</sup> as well as the partnership of institutional collaborations, have amplified the mainstream visibility of the project. According to the event's website, Amal reached "an estimated 1 million people along the route of 13 countries she has visited, and tens of millions more online".<sup>34</sup>

**31** After Brexit, the situation for refugees has worsened in the UK, since the EU's Dublin Regulation has not been replaced with an equivalent regulation.

**32** In September 2022, Amal is in New York, with 50 events created in partnership with St. Ann's Warehouse.

**33** Among them are Anish Kapoor, Cate Blanchett, Jude Law, Gillian Anderson, Michael Morpurgo, Anouska Shankar.

**34** <https://www.walkwithamal.org/past-events/>.

This extensive media coverage provoked a debate in the theatrical world.<sup>35</sup> Just a few days after its passage in the UK, some critics and artists shared their reflections in the British press on the need for free participatory art in public space, especially in times of pandemic. As the critic Verity Healey wonders:

[*The Walk*] certainly provides possibilities for some of the debates currently raging in the United Kingdom such as: Where does and where can theatre take place? For whom and by whom? [...] It's also a very bold exercise in exploring how big theatre can get. Just how many people can it reach? How many people from different cultures and countries can it involve? [*The Walk's*] larger audiences were people outside those arenas and occupying different societal spaces. Even the stone-throwing fascists in Greece are included in this audience. (Healey 2022)

As the founders of Good Chance Theatre often recall, it has always been a question of space. Their work is focused on a process of amplifying public theatrical space and reversing the perspectives between the centre and the edges. Working on the shifting threshold between large mainstream production and citizen public art, they propose a practice of creation based on grassroots networking and relational performance. With *The Walk*, temporary, itinerant and virtual publics join themselves and shape artistic, political and spatial actions in the name of free movement across borders.

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**35** Even the musical world participates in the debate with an article published in *Operawire* that criticised the Royal Opera House for having organised one of the rare private events of the travelling performance, addressed to a select audience (Lypustina 2021).

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# Rendering Race Through a Paranoid Postsocialist Lens Activist Curating and Public Engagement in the Postcolonial Debate in Eastern Europe

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**Abstract** This chapter engages with the heated public debate on racial representation and colonial history that arose around Kumu Art Museum's exhibition *Rendering Race* (2021) in Estonia. As an academic activist intervention, it proposed an important shift by changing racist titles of artworks from the twentieth century and thereby for the first time in the museum's practice considered minority groups as its publics. The chapter analyses the curatorial strategies used and the key points of contention in the public debate to consider what it revealed and obscured about Eastern Europe's relationship to the aftermath of European colonialism.

**Keywords** Activist curating. Renaming. Postcolonial Europe. Postsocialism. Eastern Europe. Estonian art.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 *Rendering Race* as an Academic Activist Project. – 3 The Public Lives of *Rendering Race*. – 4 Rethinking Anxieties about the Postcolonial Debate. – 5 Concluding Remarks.

## 1 Introduction

In the current climate of increasing polarisation of societies and the rise of right-wing movements in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, academics and public intellectuals play an active role in translating, situating, and shaping global debates for local publics. A powerful example of these divisive issues that have galvanised academics into action is the variety of campaigns to decolonize institutions of knowledge production, such as museums and universities, and struggles to counter racism in Europe which have gained new momentum across the globe with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US and its transnational reiterations. In many contexts, museums have paved the way in communicating postcolonial and decolonial debates<sup>1</sup> to local audiences, using cultural heritage to create public discussions that are often very emotional because they touch upon deeply rooted understandings of values, identity and belonging.

In this chapter, we focus on Estonia as an example of a postsocialist Eastern European context where the urgent task of examining Europe as postcolonial and the country's relation to it unexpectedly emerged around a public debate about an art exhibition. Curated by US American art historian Bart Pushaw, this exhibition *Rendering Race* (17 February-5 December 2021) was held at the temporary Project Space of the National Art Museum Kumu and formed a part of its new permanent exhibition *Landscapes of Identity: Estonian Art 1700-1945*. With its focus on historical visual representations of race and racial difference, underexplored in the Estonian context, the exhibition reached an engaged public far beyond regular museum visitors. In particular, the curatorial decision to change racially charged titles of artworks provoked heated discussions that unfolded during the almost one year that the exhibition was open. To our knowledge, it is the first time that such renaming of artworks, which has been a contentious practice in countries like the Netherlands or Germany, has taken place in Eastern Europe.

Drawing on our knowledge of Estonia as “intimate insiders outside” and our politics of location (Tali, Astahovska 2022) as visual culture scholars writing from and with a postcolonial and postsocialist perspective, we examine both the exhibition and the emotionally charged public reactions that it provoked. We suggest that *Rendering Race* can be viewed as an example of academic activist curating that attempted to bring the subject of race into Estonia's public consciousness via an independent curator's collaboration with the mu-

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<sup>1</sup> We mostly use the term “postcolonial” although the discussions pertain to the decolonial debate as well. For postcolonial responses to decolonial interventions, see Colpani et al. 2022.



seum. We will analyse the curatorial strategies used in this exhibition and the key points of contention in public reactions. Insights into this debate and its cultural and geopolitical implications allow us to demonstrate why this exhibition caused such a stir and what the public response revealed and obscured about Eastern Europe's relationship to the aftermath of European colonialism.

## 2 **Rendering Race as an Academic Activist Project**

Weaving together insights from cultural and art historians, Kumu Art Museum has recently made a significant contribution to the much-needed process of rethinking Estonian history beyond the narrow nationalist frame. As a result, the museum's renewed permanent exhibition, curated by Kadi Polli and Linda Kaljundi, offers a new perspective on local history that highlights the historical cultural plurality of the country by focusing on Russian and Baltic-German communities that had previously not been made sufficiently visible in a nation-centred narrative predominant in the history-writing of the region. From the beginning of the eighteenth century until the First World War, the Estonian territory was colonised by the Russian Empire, although its governance and education remained mostly German even until 1918 when Estonia became independent. The process of revisiting local history at Kumu involved an intensified focus on gender, class, and race, hence also complicating predominant understandings of Estonianness and the country's shifting place within Europe.

The exhibition *Rendering Race* that complemented the permanent exhibition grew out of curiosity for why Estonian artists of the twentieth century suddenly became interested in depicting people from other cultures (Kaljundi 2021). The external curator Bart Pushaw, a long-term collaborator of Kumu, was invited to engage with artworks of the 1920s and 1930s from the museum's collection through a focus on race and racial differences [fig. 1]. The exhibition told the story of how "[t]he global reach of European imperialism facilitated frequent contacts between Estonians and people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas" (Pushaw 2021) and the curator proposed to read this story through a postcolonial lens.

Since the theme of race has largely been absent from Estonian history writing, appearing for a long time only with reference to the eugenics movement in the 1930s (e.g., see Weiss-Wendt 2013; Kalling 2013), Pushaw's decision had an activist orientation. Whereas activist work is often seen as in opposition and as external to museum organisations, we understand academic activist curating in this case as a type of pedagogical practice that helps to draw attention to marginalised subjectivities and to initiate public conversations on previously unexplored topics. Our case study brings to the fore the possi-



**Figure 1** Screenshot of the guided video tour by the curator Bart Pushaw at the *Rendering Race* exhibition. The video was produced by Kumu Museum and made available via its website

bility of engaging with such work through collaboration and at least partially from within museums.

What a postcolonial perspective in the Estonian context might mean is a complex matter. Postcolonial critique of Europe often denotes “critique of the overseas colonial past of several Western European countries and of the superiority of the West according to the universalist thinking of the Enlightenment”, in which countries of East-Central Europe have played “an insignificant or no role” (Kováts 2021). While this question has been raised and explored by many scholars,<sup>2</sup> these debates still tend to overlook the positioning of East-Central Europe because of its complex relationship to the colonial history of Europe, particularly when viewed from the perspective of “postcolonial/post-socialist juncture” (Tlostanova 2017). So far, a postcolonial approach to cultures in the Baltic region has been particularly insightful for analysing the Soviet period, for instance, through the concept of “Soviet colonialism” (Annus 2012; 2018). More recently, however, the introduction of the concept of “entangled histories” (Undusk 2000; Werner, Zimmermann 2006; Laanes 2020), influenced by postcolonial studies and the idea of interconnectedness of different cultures in the region, marks a shift away from the more typical methodological nationalism that has been prevalent in the history writing of the region.

<sup>2</sup> Bakić-Hayden 1995; Kelertas 2006; Boatcă 2020; Koobak et al. 2021.

Race is a topic that is difficult to raise because most people in Estonia do not think about themselves as racialised subjects. Unacknowledged anxieties about race and racialisation are closely tied to the relation Estonia has with Europeanness. Like many other Eastern European states which are consistently placed in the hierarchy of “degrees of Europeanness” as “epigonal Europe in the East” which is “‘not yet’ modern” (Boatcă 2020, 10), this sense of an imagined and perceived “lagging behind” European modernity (Koobak 2013; Koobak, Marling 2014) has been ingrained in the Estonian nationalist narrative since the national awakening in the nineteenth century. The disintegration of the Soviet and Eastern European socialisms created a vast population invested in “becoming European” again (Dzenovska 2018, 16) and asserting their Europeanness due to the concurrent perceived misrecognition of Eastern Europe as “lesser European” compared to its Western counterpart that has designated this position to them since the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994). Furthermore, the investment in becoming a European subject has been linked to the struggle to gain equal recognition for the narratives of the twentieth century history of the Baltic States within the “core” narrative of what “Europe” is (Mälksoo 2009, 655).

Pushaw introduced a transnational perspective to representations of racial differences in Estonian art in the exhibition by emphasising “the importance of race as a phenomenon of visual difference” (Pushaw 2021) and encouraging Estonians to “start thinking about wider connections with the world” (Kaljundi, Pushaw, Velvet 2021). The exhibition encompassed a variety of material, including sketches of theatre set designs, etiquettes of cigarette and tobacco packages next to paintings, graphics, sculptures, and caricatures by some of the most acknowledged local artists of the early twentieth century. Hence, the topic of race was contextualised in the broader visual culture of the era, turning the exhibition into an important addition to scholarship on Estonian culture and history which has rarely evoked the concept of race.

In exhibitions motivated by activism, museum wall texts function as amplifiers of the affective force of images (Simon 2014, 70), guiding the viewers’ gaze. Upon entering the project space area of *Rendering Race*, the visitor first encountered a wall text that framed the presented material. Thematically, the exhibition was divided into four themes, “Desire”, “Beauty and Ugliness”, “Entertainers” and “The Timeless East”, although these were not specifically demarcated or explained. The text began by marking its temporal focus on the first decades of Estonian independence that saw profound and irreversible changes in the social status of Estonians, “transforming how they perceived themselves” (Pushaw 2021). Furthermore, Pushaw suggested that through their encounters with people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas, which became possible because of European colonialism, Estonians

realised that the general categories of race assumed more importance than specific categories of ethnicity or nationality: if any dark-skinned person with tropical origins was Black, then light-skinned Estonians were white. (Pushaw 2021)

Using the category “white” to refer to Estonians was a bold intervention by the curator since in the Estonian language racialised terms are mostly used to describe people and cultures who are visibly different from the unmarked majority white population.

One of the challenges that the curator faced was the question what to do with titles of artworks from the early twentieth century that used language deemed offensive in contemporary context. As the recent debates around whether the use of the Estonian word “neeger” is racist have demonstrated, many people who insist on it still being a neutral non-offensive descriptive term, as it was a hundred years ago (Lips 2021), end up using it exactly for that effect – to offend. Therefore, the curator’s main activist gesture was to change racialised titles of artworks. Following a similar practice in several other countries, this curatorial strategy aimed to remove

from the museum’s vocabulary – and from the broader societal vocabulary – words that emerged as part of racist and discriminatory discourses, which [...] have shaped in harmful ways how certain groups are perceived and represented. (Modest 2018, 13-14)

In this case, the curator decided to present the new neutral names alongside the older exoticising and discriminatory labels which were included in a smaller font and in brackets in order to create a broader discussion about “how historical images of race inform the injustices of today” (Pushaw 2021). For example, Kristine Mei’s glazed ceramic sculpture previously titled “Negro with bananas” (1925) was renamed “Man with bananas” and Eduard Wiiralt’s print “Negro heads” (1933) was replaced with “Heads”.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the derogatory word “gypsy” was also changed, for instance, by replacing the title of Aino Bach’s etching “Young Gypsy” (1934) with “Young Roma”. This gesture thus acknowledged the role of language in showing respect towards and recognition of marginalised groups. However, some changes in titles were also motivated by other reasons. For instance, Eduard Wiiralt’s woodcut that was named “Oriental Motif” (1925) in the reputable 1958 catalogue of the artist was renamed “Family” because the previous title was inaccurate. Changes like these reflect the challenges of contemporary museum work,

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**3** In the interest of readability, we only include the English translations of the artworks’ titles and not the Estonian originals throughout this chapter.



Figure 2 Exhibition view with the collection of Dimitri and Ivan Solomentsev on the foreground. Photo by S.Stepaško. Courtesy of the Kumu Museum

balancing between staying true to the artists' intentions and considering current debates on racial justice and legacies of colonialism.

Interestingly, Pushaw also integrated artworks of African origin from collections of other local museums [fig. 2] in juxtaposition with the artworks by Estonian artists in order to further explore how Estonians of that time encountered cultural differences and how their perception of racialised people was shaped by European colonialism. The brief wall text explained that these artworks were part of the collection of African art brought to Estonia by Dimitri Solomentsev who was dispatched together with his brother Ivan by the Ministry of the French Colonies in 1928, "to work as medics in the French Congo and the Belgian Congo" (Pushaw 2021). While Ivan died of malaria in 1934, Dimitri returned to Estonia, donating their collection to the Estonian National Museum. By including these objects in the exhibition, Pushaw raised the theme of collaboration of Estonians with Western administrations in overseas colonies and opened the question how Estonian history could be conceptualised through a postcolonial lens differently than has been done thus far. As the accompanying wall text alluded to the colonial fantasies of collectors of such artworks, we might conclude that Pushaw aimed to challenge the widespread and largely unquestioned insistence in Estonian public discourse on Estonia having nothing to do with colonialism.

The exhibition also purposely included some openly racist images by caricature artist Gori (Vello Agori) which were displayed behind a wall and accompanied by a warning sign indicating that the artworks were “examples of anti-Black racism in Estonian art” (Pushaw 2021). The curator explained in an interview that even though he initially hesitated to include these disturbing images in the exhibition, “it was the museum’s task to show uncomfortable things as well” (Potisepp 2021) and instead of hiding them away, invite the visitors to reflect on how Estonian visual culture was also inter-connected with the racist worldviews of that time. Since the satirical caricatures are offensive, the curator decided to separate them from the rest of the exhibition so that the visitors could choose not to see them.

Significantly, the act of changing titles of artworks in Kumu Museum initiated by Pushaw and fiercely debated by the public carried a symbolic weight for local museums at large since the new versions of the titles continue to appear in the digital search engine ‘MUIS’ of musealized heritage in Estonia (Maasik 2021). In our view, such activist curating with a teaching moment introduces a more entangled understanding of history which plays a particularly important role in rethinking local identities and deeply ingrained national narratives. In the next section, we trace the public reactions to this gesture in order to take a closer look at the specific dynamics of public engagement with questions of race and postcolonial Europe. This enables us to further nuance the implications of European colonialism in Eastern Europe which sees itself as separate and has for long congealed the entangled nature of the historical and cultural developments in its history writing.

### 3 The Public Lives of *Rendering Race*

When *Rendering Race* opened in early 2021, it immediately provoked a whirlwind of heated reactions which unfolded into a debate that lasted throughout the 11 months that it stayed open. This was hardly unpredictable considering the rise of right-wing politics that has emerged in Estonia in recent years, yet more extensive in scale than the museum had anticipated. Like many other countries, Estonia has seen an increase in openly racist and xenophobic statements in the local media, contributing to the polarisation of the contemporary society into traditionally and progressively thinking groups, particularly since the right-wing party EKRE reached a large presence in the Estonian Parliament in 2019. The manifestation of illiberal discourse has, in turn, strengthened the progressively oriented groups as well. Alongside the public debate about other polarising issues such as ethnicity, nationalism, human rights, migration, the rise of feminism or the threat of the climate crisis, the exhibition firmly placed the topic

of race and colonialism amongst the divisive issues that imprint the rhetoric of politicians and citizens alike, revealing the most burning anxieties around socio-political problems in Estonia.

The debate around *Rendering Race* involved different key agents, including the curator, conservative critics, several members of EKRE, academics, art professionals and organisations gathering experts in the fields of arts and museums. The main outlets where the discussion took place were the daily and weekly newspapers, comment sections of these newspapers, public online media platform ERR and right-wing platform *Uued Uudised*, art magazine, public radio, a podcast, and social media channels. Around the time of the exhibition opening in February 2021 when the curator was in Estonia, the media approached him for interviews but after he left, the museum curators answered media requests for comments. Although the international coverage of the exhibition was scarce, the curator was invited to talk about it in a series of online talks organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art as part of their project “Reflecting Post-Socialism through Post-Colonialism in the Baltics”, and *Eurozine* published an interview with him (Kaljundi, Pushaw, Velvet 2021).

As it quickly became clear, public engagement with questions around how Estonia relates to discourses of race and European colonialism played out differently than the curator and the museum had expected. The museum hoped to create an arena for rethinking Estonian history globally (Hellerma 2021): to raise questions about the position of Estonian artists in relation to European imaginaries of racial differences and the nature of unequal power relations in local and international contexts (Maasik 2021). Instead, it was the act of changing racially charged titles of artworks that became the central point of contention in the media and triggered highly emotional reactions. As an immediate response, several opinion pieces were published in public online media and daily newspapers which interpreted the renaming of artworks as “absurd” (Uued Uudised 2021a); a form of “cancel culture” (Valge 2021); being “in contradiction with the museum’s task to preserve cultural heritage” (Kiviberg in Eesmaa 2021); and many drew parallels with practices of censorship during the Soviet era (Luik 2021; Hennoste in Hellerma 2021). Furthermore, it was seen as “falsification” of history (Vahtre 2021) and framed as an undemocratic attempt to present the so-called politically correct opinion as “the only correct opinion” (Uued Uudised 2021b).

Since the public debate was so heated, the museum invested more time in explaining the themes of the exhibition and defending the curator’s choices than is normally common. For instance, this explanatory work involved an interview with the curators of the new permanent exhibition at Kumu (Raud 2021), a blog post on the museum’s website clarifying the process of changing titles of artworks (Tiideberg 2021) and Linda Kaljundi’s interview with Bart Pushaw and his-

torian Aro Velvet (Kaljundi 2021). They underlined the commonality of the practice to change the titles of artworks within museum work when new information about them resurfaces or because older artworks are often left untitled, it is not uncommon for the museum staff to give descriptive titles to them much later.

After several critics claimed on social media that *Rendering Race* censored “authentic” culture expressed in the artworks’ original titles, the response to the exhibition quickly escalated and shifted from the cultural sphere to the political. The debates took a surprising turn when the MPs of EKRE requested that the Minister of Culture appear at a Parliament hearing and justify the exhibition and its politics of renaming artworks. The parliamentary interpellation that took place three months after the exhibition opened was a clear attempt to politicise this curatorial decision. Jaak Valge, a historian and the representative of EKRE who brought the request for an explanation forward, suggested that renaming artworks in the museum collection was an undemocratic practice and he associated such “copying foreign and over-ideologized campaigns” (Parliamentary debate 2021) with the repressive interventions of the Soviet regime into artistic practice in Estonia. He framed it as an example of “cancel culture”, “a step further from the concept of leftist liberal political correctness that disapproves certain use of language” (Parliamentary debate 2021). He also pointed out that cancel culture disregards the fact that people cannot be held responsible for the offences of the past generations, and that we should not make judgements about history according to current values.

In her response, the Minister of Culture Anneli Ott stressed the experimental nature of the exhibition. She confirmed that Estonian cultural heritage was not endangered because *Rendering Race* involved a very small selection of Estonian art and the new neutral titles of the artworks suggested by the curator would remain side by side with the old ones in the museum databases. During the debate, members of EKRE extended the conversation in different directions, instrumentalising the exhibition for their own political purposes, at times turning the Minister’s answers around or disregarding them altogether.

The parliamentary debate, in turn, provoked an emotional reaction among art and cultural professionals. It led the professional organisations in the fields of art and museums to defend the autonomy of cultural expression in a public statement to the Parliament (Public statement 2021). They described the debate as not only offensive towards the external curator and his work, but also as unfair to the Minister of Culture who was put in a complicated situation when she was asked to explain and justify the specific content of the exhibition. They saw this attempt by the right-wing party to demand the minister to interfere in the conceptual work of the institutions under her responsibility as a concrete request for censorship which would



have an intimidating effect on the cultural and art sphere, particularly with respect to initiatives that raise topical and potentially contentious issues. Moreover, they strongly defended the principle that in a democratic society we cannot and should not prescribe who is allowed to comment on the country's history and cultural heritage or which topics can be addressed and from which perspectives.

Furthermore, since the museum was closed due to another round of COVID-19 restrictions shortly after the exhibition opened in early 2021, very few people could see it at the time that the debate was unfolding. The curator's guided video tour<sup>4</sup> on the Kumu website enabled the exhibition to reach a broader public than regular museum visitors, but for many this remained their only impression. Such a limited engagement with the postcolonial perspective it proposed ended up amplifying the controversial reactions. It shifted attention away from the artworks to the various emotions raised by the unprecedented debate in the Parliament around curatorial work with the effect of further dividing the public.

However, the exhibition also led to critical public engagement with questions of postcolonial Europe, particularly how present-day Eastern Europe grapples with the discourse around the former colonial practices of Western Europe. Several commentators in the debate pointed out that in the Estonian public discourse it is common to insist that "we have nothing to do with colonialism" and "our colonial legacy only has to do with once having been colonised by Germans and Russians, and later by the Soviet Union" (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021; Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021). Yet, as the exhibition suggested, Estonians were linked to the world of colonies and empires through transnational connections that opened to artists and other intellectuals during the first Estonian independence as well as through the circulation of commodities. Due to the Soviet era, which separated the Soviet sphere of influence from the rest of the world, this knowledge has been lost in public memory. As cultural historian Linda Kaljundi pointed out, the news and visual culture of the Western colonial world were, in fact, very present in the public discourse during the national awakening of Estonia at the end of the nineteenth century when many of the artists included in the exhibition grew up (Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021). In many ways then, the exhibition allowed the public to reflect on the variety of ways that Estonian artists perceived and represented colonial relations, for instance, through identifying with colonised people due to local historical experience of oppression but also at times exoticising them (Kaljundi in Hellerma 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> Bart Pushaw on *Rendering Race*: <https://kunstimuseum.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/project-space-ii-rendering-race/>.

Moreover, commenting on the African artefacts brought to Estonia by the Solomentsev brothers, historian Aro Velmet highlighted that the exhibition pointed to how Estonian history is “deeply embedded in the history of colonialism not just on a discursive level, but also in very material ways” (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021). Such connections continue to this day, for example, through circulation of capital or Estonia’s participation in military missions in Mali, a former French colony, and in the US invasion of Iraq (Velmet in Kaljundi et al. 2021). Likewise, in one of the concluding articles of the extended local debates, designer and writer Maria Muuk raised the question of Eastern Europe’s dependence on Western colonial world and opportunities that this relationship created, bringing public attention to the question of complicity it raises (Muuk 2021). In public perception though, these attempts to foster new topics, narratives, and sensibilities in approaching history tend to clash with the inward-looking national visions of the past and narratives of victimhood that have been definitive to the self-image of Estonia since the end of the nineteenth century and heightened during the postsocialist era. These deeply ingrained national narratives become symbolic resources that are constantly revived and reinvented in the face of changing global discourses.

#### 4 Rethinking Anxieties about the Postcolonial Debate

Scholarship that examines Europe through a postcolonial lens includes a wide variety of critical approaches (Ponzanesi, Colpani 2016; Jensen 2020) which insist in different ways on the “inseparability of present-day Europe from its hegemonic position in the world and its colonial history of violence and exploitation in the name of European modernity and civilization” (Butt et al. 2022, 20). *Rendering Race* sought for ways to touch upon this perspective that sees Eastern Europeans as “just beginning to realise that the memory of their trauma, the terrors of the Second World War and the memory of slavery exist in a shared space of remembrance and the two have been influencing each other in multidirectional ways” (Kaljundi 2022). Yet the specific strategies that the curator used – presenting a wide variety of racial representations from Estonian art and history museums’ collections, putting diverse artistic positions towards the theme side by side, and juxtaposing Estonian artists’ work with that of African artists to raise critical awareness about these topics – did not quite lead to the desired debate. Instead, the debate that did emerge revealed a series of anxieties around Estonia’s identity and belonging to Europe.

In our analysis, some of the misunderstandings and omissions that fuelled the reactions to *Rendering Race* arose from the confusions around the curatorial text introducing the exhibition which came

across as a matter-of-fact style ‘new’ narrative of Estonian history. This text did not explicitly raise any questions that would have invited the public to reflect on or explain the different artists’ positions in representing racial differences. Its lack of contextualisation of the subjects of race and colonialism in Estonian art and culture and occasional ambivalence in phrasing led to many misconceptions among the public which limited the possibility of engaging with the exhibited works. In fact, the wall text of *Rendering Race* seemed to close the possibility of identification with the raised themes and therefore a large portion of the public discussion continued to revolve around the question of what the curator had misunderstood.

Several critics noted that it was the wall text rather than the exhibition itself that became the focal point of the discussions (Hellerma 2021). The text framed the 1920s and 1930s in a way that neglected the consequent decades in Estonian history after the Second World War which still figure prominently in cultural memory. Most significantly, since Pushaw neither specifically related to nor brought in the familiar story of the terror of Soviet occupation following the first decades of Estonian independence (Saar 2021; Kivimaa 2021; Luik 2021), his framing of the exhibition was seen as lacking sensitivity towards aspects of Estonian history and cultural identity that are often considered crucial if not definitive. By introducing a post-colonial perspective on race through his curatorial choices, the curator dismissed the memory of socialism.

The heated debate over renaming the artworks, which became the main object of contention, and which was sometimes perceived as a form of cultural colonialism by the curator (Kivimaa 2021; Hennoste 2021; Kaus in Hellerma 2021), exemplifies how the histories and legacies of European colonialism still need to be worked through in post-Soviet societies. The relatively recent nature of the Soviet colonial regime has shaped a different contemporary understanding of colonialism in the Baltic context compared to Western Europe where colonialism is predominantly associated with the overseas conquering of land and people for profit. The specific Baltic narratives of victimhood and colonialism have often been misunderstood or misrepresented by scholars in the West due to the divergent interpretations of the Second World War and the Cold War in Eastern and Western Europe (Tali, Astahovska 2022). When the wall text talked about “injustices of today”, it referred to racial injustices and not injustices considered most urgent in popular conception of the word in the Estonian context, that is, associated with Estonia’s own victim narrative. This led some critics to read the new narrative proposed by the curator as offensive towards Estonian culture (Luik 2021), or even suggest that the museum should issue a public apology (Vahtre 2021). Hence, the introductory text of the exhibition created an obstacle for the public engagement with the exhibited work and brought about



**Figure 3**  
Aleksander Uurits, *Roma Woman*.  
Formerly titled *Gypsy Woman*. 1912.  
Oil painting. Photo R. Koobak

the overtly emotional responses. The debate around *Rendering Race* revealed the continued urgency and need to negotiate the Soviet-era narratives of trauma when discussing colonial injustices which are seen to be far removed and secondary in comparison to the more recent Soviet colonial regime.

It is important to note that the curatorial strategy of giving more neutral titles to artworks, some of which were created by most appreciated artists in Estonian cultural history, managed to produce an important shift in the sphere of art museums which is often conservative. Due to their hierarchical organisation and focus on displaying artworks to one-sidedly educate their publics (i.e., Duncan 1995; Tali 2018), art museums have for long been difficult sites for holding open discussions. The debate revealed a conflict in the museum between the traditional ways of working and the need to be attentive to local audience groups to remain a welcoming environment for all publics. On the one hand, the voices of minority publics such as local people of colour or Roma people were missing from public reac-

tions to the exhibition as well as from the panel discussion held at the Kumu Museum upon the closing of *Rendering Race*. On the other hand, the curator's activist intervention was not only symbolic but also produced a real and lasting effect on other museums and their use of language that is now more considerate towards these minority groups [fig. 3]. Hence, minority publics who are mostly invisible or whose voices are largely absent in local media and cultural arena more broadly were for the first time actively considered as part of the museum's publics. The gesture of renaming the artworks implicitly acknowledged that the museum has agency in creating publics via textual and visual narratives.

Even though the exhibition aimed to spark conversations about the relationship Estonia has to European colonialism, it neither fully considered the multiplicity and complexity of historically layered ethnic relations and local colonialisms nor their impact on the identity and sense of belonging in Estonia. For instance, the example of the Solomentsev brothers and their involvement in the violent colonial regime as doctors raises many questions in the context of the exhibition. Their collection of art objects from Congo displayed at the exhibition, which was the only constellation of objects that brought up the topic of potential complicity in colonial violence, reveals the challenges of discussing complicity without well-founded knowledge about the brothers' ethnic background or reasons for joining the French and Belgian colonial project. The fact that their names are Russian-sounding (they are called "Estonia-based" in the Estonian wall text and "Estonian" in the English version), which might seem as a minor detail to outside viewers, complicates the way the Estonian public might identify with their story as it evokes local colonial relations and tensions. As the explanatory context given about the brothers was very brief, some of the commentators reacted and called the brothers "Russian doctors" instead, claiming that calling them Estonian resulted in the unfair transfer of colonial guilt to Estonians.

Admittedly, the small-scale space that the museum dedicated to *Rendering Race* made it difficult to accommodate the curator's ambitions. This created a tension that did not always work in favour of the conceptual accessibility of the overall narrative of the exhibition. However, despite the challenges, as Aro Velvet pointed out, it did prompt the viewers to think more deeply about how those "whose flag was not waved somewhere in Africa or Asia" might be connected to colonialism (Velvet 2021). While the exhibition cannot provide direct answers, it can certainly raise questions about complicity and complicate matters beyond what politician and historian Jaak Valge suggested in his comment that "helping Africans as doctors, even if that is done in collaboration with colonial powers, should not make us responsible for colonialism" (Parliamentary debate 2021). The insufficient contextualisation of the story of the two brothers thus ends

up strengthening the commonplace attitudes that because Estonians have been colonised themselves, they should bear no responsibility for European colonialism.

The renewed intellectual engagement with the concept of “race” in the wake of the recent political struggles around anti-racism and decolonisation across the globe demands that we also rethink the so-called “Eastern European exceptionalism” within global coloniality and the global order of “race” that has secured power and privilege for white people. The preparatory research for *Rendering Race* and the more critical reflections on its aftermath have already laid the groundwork for an emerging discussion on race in the Estonian context where it has thus far been fairly absent (Pushaw 2020a; Pushaw 2020b; Kaljundi 2022). Yet rather than inviting a nuanced public engagement with racial representation and historical complicities, the exhibition produced a space where existing anxieties around race and colonialism were re-circulated and reified by the public and among politicians.

In our reading, *Rendering Race* adapted transnational postcolonial and decolonial debates selectively, leaving limited space to investigate how Estonia – and more broadly Eastern Europe – is implicated in keeping up the colonial mode of power that still endures in Europe today. We suggest that this happened partly because the exhibition failed to relate in a clear way to contemporary postsocialist cultural memory that is so deeply ingrained in the public consciousness and self-understanding of Estonians. It is then hardly surprising that an act of renaming gets read through an almost paranoid postsocialist lens that sees it as censorship and a threat to “authentic” culture.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Since debates around Europe as postcolonial evoke contested notions of Europe and its racialised borders and peripheries, they tend to stir up contradictory emotions, desires, and animosities among the public. Such debates in Eastern Europe are often limited to the local context and remain accessible only in the local language without engaging audiences beyond national borders, so translating and situating them becomes a form of academic activism in itself. Unpacking the activist curatorial strategies and the public response to *Rendering Race* in this chapter demonstrated, first and foremost, the many obstacles to engaging with different ideas of Europe, its colonial history, and its connection to different regions of the world.

Activist curating presents a productive way of bringing together postcolonial scholarship and its mediation to a broader public because it engages diverse publics in contested conversations about colonial power relations and their continued impact on different so-

cieties and cultural communities. However, introducing global discussions around racial difference and colonial legacies to audiences used to their own nationalist underpinnings of European discourses requires considerate and conscious curatorial framing that cannot afford to neglect the predominant contemporary cultural memory. While the project succeeded in opening new connections for Estonian art history, bringing new topics into public consciousness, and, importantly, approaching minority publics with a new sensitivity, we argue that its inadequate contextualisation ultimately closed off deeper public engagement with narratives of postcolonial Europe.

When tasked with rethinking complex colonial relationships and establishing connections with local histories, art museums find themselves in a new position in relation to external curators who can introduce novel research-based perspectives and contribute to organising public programs around museum collections. Through launching such collaborations art museums can serve as important sites for rethinking the convergences between local, national, and global discourses of postcolonial Europe. Nevertheless, as the curator expressed in an interview, such work may create uncertainties about fully understanding cultural differences in all their specificities. Inevitably, there are layers of cultural history that may be lost. The many misunderstandings the exhibition produced revealed the challenges of rethinking transnational histories from a postcolonial perspective in a context where centring on the national narrative – as a form of resistance to an oppressive regime and precondition for survival – has for long been so dominant in history writing that it fails to fathom the possibility of having benefited from the suffering of others.

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# Bowie in Berlin, or, the Postcolonial Intellectual Unmasked

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**Abstract** In this chapter, I use the perhaps unlikely figure of David Bowie to test the boundaries of the postcolonial intellectual, referring primarily to his years in Berlin, the city where, in his celebrated 1987 concert at the Reichstag, he sent his “best wishes to our friends who are on the other side of the Wall”. At the same time, I use Bowie’s extraordinary life and work, and the media machinery that surrounded it, to contest the so-called ‘demotic turn’ through which increasing intellectual authority has been given to ordinary citizens, each of whom can become a celebrity, if not necessarily an intellectual, in his or her own right.

**Keywords** Bowie. Intellectual. Postcolonial. Celebrity. Social media.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Bowie as Intellectual. – 3 Bowie as Postcolonial. – 4 Bowie as Celebrity. – 5 Coda: The Duke is Dead. Long Live the Duke!

## 1 Introduction

The best portrait of David Bowie I know is also the shortest: a chapter in the Canadian travel writer Rory MacLean’s excellent 2014 collection of interviews and sketches about historical and contemporary Berlin. Bowie, MacLean explains, was “driven by a relentless urge to create, as well as a great deal of cocaine”, reaching a nadir in LA where, for years already world-famous, he lived

in a kind of prolific mania [...] denying himself sleep for seven or eight days at a time [and] slipping into a bizarre, nihilistic fantasy world of [Egyptian mysticism and] imminent doom. (2014, 335)

Drug-addled, confused, increasingly taken over by his own theatrical personas, Bowie badly needed to escape – and he did so by returning to Europe, more specifically to “the capital of reinvention”, West Berlin (336).

Not that Bowie was a reformed character in Berlin; he was never a reformed character. The years he spent in Berlin were scarcely less manic than the ones he had previously spent in LA, and MacLean paints a vivid picture of Bowie, accompanied by his old chum and self-styled degenerate Iggy Pop, parading around the city in an open-top Mercedes, snorting coke whenever and wherever possible and “stumbling into gutters and [seedy] transvestite bars” (338). But at the same time, the Berlin years were cathartic, and the music he produced, notably the albums *Low* and *Heroes*, both “portrayed the darkness and purged him of it” (340), helping him in the process to exorcise one of his most negative personas, the faintly menacing, crypto-fascistic figure of the Thin White Duke.

The Thin White Duke (of whom more later) was himself a perverse Teutonic character, born of Bowie’s lifelong fascination with the Nazis and his own childhood experiences of growing up in the shadow of the Second World War (MacLean 2014, 343). But a few ill-judged comments aside, Bowie was no Nazi; rather, as MacLean suggests, he was entranced by the theatrical potential Nazism offered, and he studied Riefenstahl’s choreographed films and Goebbels’ “manufactured mythology”, even going so far as to sketch out a musical – perhaps thankfully never performed – “based on the Propaganda Minister’s life” (343). He was also keenly aware of Nazism’s victims, and the more he came to know Berlin, the more his sympathies extended to those other victims as he saw them: those East Berliners whose lives, scarcely known to him, were lived out on the other side of the Wall.

The double life of a partitioned city was always likely to appeal to a performing artist whose multiple selves were forever shadowed by multiple others, and whose romanticized portrayals of the marginalized and/or disenfranchised accorded with his own deeply felt sense of his own dissociated sensibility – of a double or, perhaps better, a multiply fractured self (Critchley 2016). Berlin was attractive in other ways as well: as a theatrical city, rich in pageantry and spectacle; and as a place of continual transformation, in which the young were seemingly in constant battle with the old and sometimes violent resistance to authority was, for many of the city’s residents, a way of life (MacLean 2014, 336-8).

## 2 Bowie as Intellectual

“Bowie in Berlin” is an oft-told tale, part of the Bowie myth, and I don’t intend to rehearse it properly here (for more worked-through renditions, see Critchley 2016; Seabrook 2008). What interests me, instead, is the extent to which Bowie’s time in Berlin, which was a catalyst for some of his best work, can also be seen as testing the boundaries of the postcolonial intellectual – and, by loose East-West association, of Europe itself (Huggan 2011). At first sight, using Bowie to test the boundaries of the intellectual, whether postcolonial or not, doesn’t seem like a particularly promising exercise. Bowie was formidably well read, but he had little desire to be seen as an intellectual. He was a celebrity, certainly, most of whose life was lived on a public stage; and he was also an aesthete of a kind, whose huge contribution to contemporary global popular culture involved the cultivation of a particular, post-Wildean version of the “aesthetics of the self” (d’Cruz 2015, 259). But he was hardly a scholar or philosopher-king, conventional albeit elitist understandings of the word “intellectual”; nor was he in an organic intellectual in the more inclusive Gramscian sense of someone who seeks to manipulate public opinion, and who may in turn be manipulated as a conduit for particular class or enterprise interests – as a route to political power (Gramsci 1996). Similarly, revisionist understandings of the public intellectual within the ostensibly democratizing context of so-called “citizen media” – a focal point for several of the essays collected in this volume – don’t quite fit the bill either; and while Bowie was well aware of the usefulness of new digital technologies in attracting and consolidating his mass following, he was much too much the individualist, and much too little the citizen, to commit to the collective forms of social transformation that such media activity supports (Stephansen 2016; see also Baker, Blaagaard 2016; Stephansen et al. 2019).

Bowie was an intellectual, perhaps, in the broad Saidian sense of “an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying [and] articulating a message [...] to and for a public, in public” (Said 1996), in full knowledge that this message may not prove popular to the authorities, and may even be co-opted by the very authorities it confronts. But so scattered and inconsistent were Bowie’s “messages” that they hardly qualify as a thought-through agenda to advance the causes of freedom and justice, the cornerstones of Said’s “critical consciousness”; and many of his rebellious words and actions were clearly the product of confusion: emanations of a restless, and often dysfunctional, spirit rather than a coolly confrontational mind. To a large extent, Bowie let his music do the talking for him; and while his lyrics have been critically dissected, the consensus is often little more than a celebratory recognition that he was a fascinating “chameleon-like figure, one who continually reinvent[ed] himself in and

across the media and art platforms in which he [was] found" (Cinque et al. 2015, 1).

### 3 Bowie as Postcolonial

So much, then, for Bowie as an intellectual, but to what extent can be seen as a *postcolonial* figure? Further caveats apply here. The first and most obvious caveat is that the term "postcolonial" refers as much to a way of reading as anything else; it is certainly not an identifying label, though - frustratingly for postcolonial critics - it continues to be used as one in the service of the contemporary culture wars (McLeod 2000). Bowie, to put it bluntly, was not from the colonies, nor did much of his work -with some exceptions - intersect with colonial experience; and if he was "anti-colonial", this was never thought through or acted upon in anything other than a broadly anti-authoritarian frame.

As suggested above, though, this doesn't mean that his life and work can't be read through a postcolonial lens, and indeed there have been some critical attempts to do so (see, for example, Hisama 1993; Redmond 2015). Probably the most interesting of these is by the Australian cultural critic Sean Redmond, who sees Bowie as having engaged more or less consistently in his work with the idea (and ideology) of *whiteness*. Whiteness, Redmond suggests, is nearly always double-edged in Bowie's work, with his star image drawing attention to "the cloak of invisibility that whiteness usually travels under, uncovering whiteness in the process while creating the very conditions for its representational and cultural power to be sustained" (Redmond 2015, 215; see also Dyer 1997). While perhaps the best example of this is the previously mentioned alter ego of the Thin White Duke, Redmond focuses on three other Bowie "white masks" - the glancing reference to Fanon is wholly intended - all of which he draws from films or videos released in 1983. In juxtaposing the deathly vampire John Blaylock in *The Hunger*, the faux-messianic major Jack ("Strafer") Celliers in *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, and the cool-blond narrator of the video of "Let's Dance", Redmond shows how Bowie uses these pseudo-autobiographical figures to unmask whiteness as an always ambivalent, but also always potentially destructive, cipher for social hierarchy and colonial power.

To take just one of these three examples, the video of "Let's Dance", in Redmond's words, "narrates the unequal relationship between two young indigenous Australians and the white power structures that operate on them" (225). Bowie features in the video as a lofty magus-figure, lording it over the people and places he encounters, but also critical of the position from which he enunciates - a position Redmond links explicitly to the postcolonial critique of white

imperial authority (226). As Redmond points out, though, this critique only goes so far, and in the final scenes of the video, which feature the Aboriginal couple dancing (red shoes and all) to Bowie's riff, it is clear – quite literally – that the white master is still calling the tune (227). The primitivist tropes of the “Let's Dance” video, which would later be repeated in the mock-Orientalist words and images of “China Girl”, may thus be seen as confirming the symbolic power of whiteness even as they try to uncover the false foundations of its privilege, undermining Bowie's ostensibly anti-racist “message” and appropriating the supposed authenticity of the indigenous/non-western other for himself (227).

#### 4 **Bowie as Celebrity**

Much more could be said here, but hopefully my general point is made: that in his brilliant mimicry, his almost preternatural ability to channel other voices and other selves, Bowie found himself repeatedly torn between his imagined sympathy for the other and his own default narcissism: a postcolonial parable for our times. Let me return now to Germany and set the scene for one of Bowie's most memorable stagings of self-as-other: his 1987 concert at the Reichstag, within spitting distance of that pre-eminent symbol of twentieth-century self-separation: the Berlin Wall. This is beautifully described by MacLean, so I will rely on him in what follows:

Ten years after his departure from Berlin [...] Bowie returned to the divided city. In June 1987 his driver drove him past [his] old Hauptstrasse apartment [...] to a stage in front of the Reichstag. As night fell he performed to a crowd of 70,000 fans, their sparklers and candles glittering around the Platz der Republik. Towards the end of the show he read aloud a message in German. ‘We send our best wishes to all our friends who are on the other side of the Wall.’ Then he sang ‘Heroes’.

On the other side of the hateful divide, hundreds of young East Berliners strained to hear the echoes of the concert. They caught sight of stage lights flashing off blank, bullet-marked walls. They heard Bowie greet them. They listened to his song. Their song. Berlin's song. [“Heroes” tells the story of aggressive border guards at the Wall firing over the heads of an amorous young couple; as MacLean says elsewhere, it would become “Berlin's rock anthem”, a song so affecting and powerful that it may even have played its part in bringing down the Wall (2014, 343).] ‘We can be heroes for just one day’, Bowie sang in a daring, ironic elegy to both the divided world and his past life. Everyone can be a hero, can be their own hero, and love can prevail, if only for one day, if only in a myth.

As 'Heroes' reached its climax some of the East German crowd pushed towards the Brandenburg Gate, whistling and chanting, 'Down with the Wall'. They threw insults and bottles at the *Volks-polizei*, rising together against the Party's thugs in a rare moment of protest. On stage Bowie heard the cheers from the other side. He was in tears. (2014, 346)

It is difficult not to be moved by this. MacLean's superbly atmospheric rendition brings the event alive for us, encapsulating its raw emotion, and confirming Bowie's own confession, given to MacLean who spent some time with him in Berlin, that "It was one of the most emotional performances I've ever done" (346). "It was breaking my heart", Bowie continues:

I'd never done anything like that in my life, and I guess I never will again... That's the town where [the song] was written, and that's the particular situation that it was written about. It was just extraordinary. (346)

MacLean's conclusion, however, is less satisfying, playing into the romantic "Bowie-in-Berlin" myth by which our hero, having "made his journey from addiction to independence", emerges from

celebrity paranoia to [become the] radical, unmasked messenger who told us, all us fat-skinny people, all the nobody people who had dreamt of a world of equals, that we were all beautiful, that we could be ourselves. (347)

Here, a dose of postcolonial realism might come in useful. This is not to take away from Bowie's idealism; nor is it to suggest that he was unaware, whether in Berlin or elsewhere, of the social and political capital that might be derived from his star image and the global appeal of his work. Perhaps, as MacLean dreamily suggests, Bowie did indeed play his own small part in bringing down the Berlin Wall. However, this needs to be seen in the context of Bowie's own circumscribed world, the surreal world of a global rock star whose transgressive persona and cultivated eccentricities were, at least in part, deliberate attempts to inhabit an 'alien' realm of his own making, sequestered from social and political realities and encased in what he probably cared about most, creative attributes of Style.

Does this mean, then, that we should discount him as an intellectual in so far as the intellectual vocation is - by most accounts - a serious-minded one, dedicated to real-world transformation, the redress of social injustice, and the betterment of life? I would argue not. Bowie, after all, even in his most stupefied states, never stopped believing in the possibility of social change, though change for him resided



first and foremost in the creative reinvention of his persona – which is a very different thing to say than that he was interested in the reinvention of himself. For me, however, it probably makes most sense to see Bowie as a *celebrity* in Nunn and Biressi’s revisionist sense of celebrity as a contemporary form of “emotional labour” at a time when “the economies of affect and intimacy [have increasingly come to] structure public life” (Cinque 2015, 207; see also Nunn, Biressi 2010). The emotional work attached to celebrity can be conscripted to very different causes, not all of them particularly progressive; the main thing to emphasize is that, due in large part to their eagerness to be seen and heard in public, celebrities serve as useful conduits for social and political debate (Turner 2004).

This isn’t so far, after all, from Gramsci’s influential concept of the organic intellectual, with the obvious exception that celebrities are often given to style themselves as “ordinary” people even though the ruthlessly competitive media-driven world in which they move ensures that they are not (Huggan 2013; Turner 2004). It is not so much, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, that celebrities are by definition anti-intellectual; rather their effectiveness depends on their capacity to function as more or less interchangeable commodities circulating within a global symbolic economy that mobilizes what the media theorist David Marshall calls celebrities’ “affective power” (Marshall 1997, xii). Celebrities, in this last sense, are bounded figures in a way that Bowie certainly was not, though it would be equally illusory to imagine that Bowie had full control over the marketing of his self-image, or that the artistic choices that governed his multiple identities were his and his alone.

Perhaps it might make most sense to see Bowie as testing the boundaries of *both* the intellectual (which he probably was not) *and* the celebrity (which he most certainly was). These boundaries, as I hope to have made clear, are permeable up to a point without being entirely porous; and so it is with many of the walls and borders – apparently increasing in number (Friedman 2016) – that are characteristic of our times. I first came across MacLean’s work during a public reading in the UK, where he read from his Bowie “Heroes” chapter. In the introduction to his talk, MacLean said that Berlin was, for him and Bowie alike, an enchanted city, “forever in the process of becoming” yet always haunted by its divided past (2014, 2). Since MacLean’s charmed life with Bowie in Berlin, the Wall has come down, but others have sprung up worldwide to replace it. As the geographer Derek Gregory said nearly thirty years ago, we live in a partitioned world that is shaped in large part by imaginative geography, and in which we never tire of finding new ideational as well as material ways of separating others from ourselves (Gregory 1994). This remains agonizingly true today – possibly truer than when Gregory first said it. The task of the intellectual is to challenge the ways of thinking that

help produce these walls; and Bowie's work, whether "intellectual" or not, has arguably contributed as much as anyone's to that task.

## 5 Coda: The Duke is Dead. Long Live the Duke!

Like most celebrities, Bowie was a creature of the media: a superb public performer, he was fully aware of the multifunctional appeal of his star image, and of the media's role in nurturing it as it metamorphosed from one, self-consciously spectacular stage to the next. As the media theorist Rita Figueiras argues, the increasing privatization of the public sphere has

led to the erosion of the modern notion of public culture built on rationality, reflexivity and critical spirit [the traditional properties of the public intellectual], and to the emergence of a culture of intimacy, informality and emotions [in its stead]. (2012, 145)

Bowie intuitively understood this. He also understood, in his own idiosyncratic way, that popular culture - including his own domain, popular music - was spawning new, emotion-driven kinds of social commentators, perhaps too loose and scattershot in their views to merit the term 'intellectual', but perhaps too socially conscious to merit the term 'celebrity', which suffers by association with the very narcissism it is often keen to disavow by, for example, supporting popular causes and morally upstanding works (Turner 2004).

It is not hard to see why these two terms, which have arguably never been opposed in the first place, have become increasingly blurred in an image-conscious age in which social recognition often seems to trump intellectual authority, and where celebrities offer sometimes unsolicited opinions on subjects about which they have little knowledge to audiences who are fully aware that some of these opinions make little sense. It is important of course not to exaggerate the hold that celebrity has - that celebrities have - over public opinion at a time when the very notion of 'public' has become increasingly fragmented, and the media channels through which it operates are increasingly dispersed (Dahlgren 2005). But perhaps we should be wary as well of seeing what Figueiras calls "the democratization of opinion production" (152) as a sign of the emancipatory potential of citizen media to mobilize dissenting counter-publics that lend voice to the marginalized and strength to the solidarity of the oppressed (Stephansen 2016; see also section 2 above).

Bowie's dissent, in any case, was of a different kind, more linked to his own rebel image than to realizable acts of social and political opposition; he was also ironically aware that the heroes he sang of were as transient, and as everyday, as celebrity itself. That said,

Bowie was no everyday celebrity, and part of his own staged rebellion was against the very idea of “ordinariness”: an ordinariness towards which much of his most powerful work shows a withering contempt. He was his own Starman waiting in the sky, his own Ziggy Stardust making love to his self-image; and he was keenly aware of the evanescence of celebrity culture – the professional imperative to move on from one celebrity persona to the next. Paradoxically, it was this extraordinary ability to shed his celebrity skin that was the guarantor of his lasting stardom: a stardom never more apparent than in the circumstances surrounding his death.

As I have noted before, nothing becomes the celebrity in his or her life like the leaving it, and Bowie was certainly no exception in this respect (Huggan 2013, 185). His untimely death in January 2016 was unexpected in so far as his long-term battle with cancer had – contrary to normative patterns of celebrity hyper-visibility – been kept out of the public eye (Van den Bulck, Larsson 2019, 308). What *was* expected, was the explosion of media coverage that swiftly followed upon it, much of it generated on social media. In scrutinizing the upsurge of Twitter activity produced by Bowie’s death – over 250,000 tweets via the #bowie hashtag within the first two days of his passing – communications scholars Hilde Van den Bulck and Anders Olof Larsson point to the broader phenomenon of “iMourning”: those various ways in which “audiences and fans [latch onto] social media as a means to unite virtually and share their grief” (Van den Bulck, Larsson 2019, 308).

Mediated mourning of this kind, the two authors suggest, supports celebratory views of Twitter as a

democratic communicative space [in which] fans and wider audiences create communities of mourners, express parasocial ties, perform creative acts and engage in worthwhile communication. (308)

However, they stop short of making the kinds of oppositional claims commonly linked with citizen media as a particular form of and/or catalyst for social activism, making it clear that what interests them are rather the ways in which popular Internet handles such as Twitter have the capacity to create multifaceted social networks around celebrity figures that extend well beyond self-designated fans (308).

They also question the ease with which social media have come to be seen as transformative spaces where “ordinary citizens” (311) can shape the news as well as participating in shared discussions about it. Twitter is a case in point in so far as different users exercise sometimes vastly different amounts of power and influence (312; see also Deller 2011). Van den Bulck and Larsson’s analysis of early Twitter reactions to Bowie’s death reveals a relatively small core of tweets, some of them retweeted several thousands of times, that

originate from what they call “a Twitter elite of mainly traditional media, bloggers, celebrities and artists” (319). This is unsurprising, they contend, in as much the relationship between celebrities and their audiences is

fundamentally mediated, and people [of all stripes are routinely] used to looking at media and other celebrities to guide them both in remaining up to date about celebrities and in many other aspects of their lives. (320)

Still, what the Twitter community shows in this particular instance is “a certain hierarchy of opinion leaders and followers, something that has been observed in other contexts as well” (321; see also Hills 2002).

It is possible, Van den Bulck and Larsson cautiously conclude, that Twitter responses to Bowie’s death will come to “prove typical of contemporary public responses to celebrity deaths in a networked society” (321), though they freely admit the shortcomings of their own research, which concentrates on a single hashtag (#bowie) operating over a limited period of time (48 hours). My own caution echoes theirs, but ranges across wider territory. Bowie was always allergic to categories, and perhaps we should be as well in view of overdrawn attempts to trace “the media’s demotic turn from the cult of the intellectual to the cult of the ordinary citizen” (Figueiras 2012, 149). To suggest that Bowie was unique is probably going too far; but if his specific case, along with the global circulation of his celebrity image, proves anything at all, it is that the shorthand of ‘cults’ and ‘turns’ is insufficient to account for *either* intellectuals *or* celebrities *or* ordinary citizens, or for the vast spectrum of differences contained within loosely descriptive categories that are not as convergent with each other as the too-easy phrase ‘demotic turn’ suggests.

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## **Section 4**

### Postcolonial Story-Telling





# The African Descendant, an ‘Invisible Man’ to the Media

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**Abstract** In the European public sphere African descendants are seldom featured as narrators of their own background and complex identity. According to European institutions and independent researchers there is a serious lack of debate about Europe’s colonial past and about the impact that it still has on the racist and discriminatory way people of African descent are portrayed and perceived. The media, in particular, could play a significant role to help cultural diversity and to oppose racism, allowing non-white Europeans to be more visible and vocal within their own organisations.

**Keywords** African-European. Mainstream media. Racism. Discrimination. Colonialism. Slavery.

I am an invisible man [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me [...]

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952)

In 2015 the European Parliament decided to support the International Decade for People of African Descent proclaimed by the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> In March 2019 the same Parliament adopted a resolution on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant parts of the resolution reads:

1 <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent>.

2 European Parliament, 2014-2019; TEXTS ADOPTED; P8\_TA(2019) 0239, Fundamental rights of people of African descent, European Parliament resolution of 26 March 2019 on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe (2018/2899(RSP)).

The European Parliament [...] calls on the Member States to de-classify their colonial archives; [...] to include some form of reparations such as offering public apologies and the restitution of stolen artefacts to their countries of origin; [...] encourages the Member States to make the history of people of African descent part of their curricula and to present a comprehensive perspective on colonialism and slavery which recognises their historical and contemporary adverse effects on people of African descent.

This resolution is a clear and sound call to action for national governments. Any European citizen would expect politicians to understand the relevance of such a resolution for national institutions, and yet there has been almost no national debate about current forms of racism as a consequence of colonialism. It is hard to find evidence that any politician in a relevant position has even thought of apologising for his own country's colonial crimes, or of proposing a change in national school curricula, as the European Parliament suggested.

When national politicians look so indifferent to European institutions' calls, it should be the mainstream media to hold political parties and the governments accountable for not responding to EU obligations. However, the national media did not pick up the European Parliament's recommendation and just a very few news websites reported the call, with almost no impact on the public sphere and on the national debate in those countries that have a history of slavery and colonialism. So how could European citizens know about the need to address those issues, if also the media remain silent, if the matter remains unreported, and if this particular group of people, the Africans descendants, remain invisible?

Actually, black Europeans, African Europeans or 'Afropeans', cannot be any invisible, since there are an estimated 15-20 million people of African descent living in Europe. They are an indispensable part of the population of the continent, either as working immigrants or people who established for generations, like the children and grandchildren from the ex colonies. They come from different backgrounds and they have contributed to Europe's development and culture for centuries. However, it is evident that their contribution is not sufficiently perceived because this group does not seem to be even formally acknowledged. In some European countries data collection does not take into account ethnic origin. In other words, they cannot be counted and their origin remains unknown.

I am a European citizen of African descent, or an Italian-Eritrean, and I can confirm that this form of invisibilization exists. My African roots and origin are not considered in my documents. I have an Italian name and surname that come from my great grand father, an Italian officer who went to colonise the land of Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa, at the end of nineteenth century. That officer had children with

an Eritrean young woman, my great grand mother Gabrù Adahana, and their first born child was my grandfather Vittorio, whom I was named after. However, the side of my African great grand mother remained almost invisible to my family. Only the name and the identity of that officer, a white European male, survived over the generations.

My parents and myself, we all grew up in post colonial Italy where the dark side of the colonial past remained almost hidden. It seems that Italy, like other European countries, has carefully neglected most of the violence, of the genocides and the terrible events of our history in Africa. After the Second World War, in the Italian public sphere colonialism was associated only with Fascism and with the Savoia monarchs, even if colonial crimes started much earlier with the liberal and socialist governments of the 1890s. Italy's post-war institutions have built national identity also on the comforting myth of the 'good Italian coloniser' when it comes to the military occupation of Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia over 60 years of colonisation (Del Boca 2013). So did most of the social, political and cultural institutions, from most of political parties to the media. When I realised that so much history was missing in the construction of the Italian and of the European identity, I felt I had to know more, and investigate what it meant to be a grandchild of colonialism, and an African descendant. As a media professional myself, I found out that still today the descendants of those Africans who were victims of the slave trade and of colonial violence are seldom featured in the media sphere as narrators of their own background and complex identity. Independent research shows that the mainstream media tend to feature immigrants, refugees, people from Africa in a silent, demeaning and stereotypical ways (Milazzo 2021). The Italian media watch *Carta di Roma* issues an annual report about media and migration, and every year data confirm this attitude. Immigrants are quoted less than 3% of the time in the news stories, in interviews, TV shows, and feature writing. Simply, they do speak for themselves, while most of the comments come from politicians (over 70%), other journalists, activists, and NGOs. According to the report, if the conservative media tend to frame Africans as potential criminals, as a threat to European society, the progressive media inevitably use a patronising tone, which is ultimately discriminatory and racist, even when they have the best intentions.

As a journalist I see that such forms of discrimination and invisibilization by the media first happen in the media own organisations, it happens within. It is hard to find in Europe's mainstream media, especially in the broadcasting system, the name and the looks of a black or brown anchorman or anchorwoman. Seldom we see journalists and media professionals who are visible, vocal or who have leading roles in the newsrooms, those who have power in the production of content, and therefore in the way media influence society.

The scarce representation of non-white European media professionals is confirmed by a recent study by the Reuters Institute for Journalism Research (Borchardt et al. 2019). Those researchers have analysed the newsroom organisation and editorial management in a hundred major media outlets, both online and print media, in various European countries, including the United Kingdom, in Germany and in Sweden, where sensitivity to multiculturalism seems widespread. According to the study, none of the major media companies in Germany and Great Britain have a non-white editor-in-chief. In Germany and in Sweden journalists with a migrant background are evidently under represented and the reason, according to the editors, seem to be the lack of adequate language skills and education.

European Commission vice-president Věra Jourová has told the online news website EURACTIV that under-representation of people with a minority racial or ethnic background in the media, including in newsrooms themselves, remains a problem that needs to be addressed, and the European Commission is ready to help with funding (Brzozowski 2020).

Under representation cannot but consolidate racial stereotypes and several forms of discrimination, along with growing social and economic inequalities. This is about the material, substantial living conditions of people, such as access to housing, to decent employment and salaries, to education and health. In addition, people of African descent are often forced to live in areas that are vulnerable to environmental degradation, with poor rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Beyond Europe, emerging forms of environmental racism are posing serious threats to the simple enjoyment of human rights for those communities. In the current debate about climate change a few recall that the African continent has contributed only to 3% of gas emissions and global warming, but African countries suffer the most the impact of the climate crisis, with devastating environmental effects, further impoverishment, further migration (UNEP). However, the perception of those forms of climate injustice and environmental racism is still weak in Europe.

European countries should make the fight against racism and racial discrimination a top priority [...] There is no shortage of legal, professional and financial tools to achieve all of this. What is lacking is political will. (Council of Europe 2021)

This is how the Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, commented the latest report on 'Afrophobia'. The report is based on the discussions that the Commissioner started two years ago with human rights defenders, who claim that people of African descent continue to be exposed to various forms of racial discrimination, including stereotyping, violence, and profil-

ing in criminal justice. According to the CoE Commissioner, the national governments and local institutions keep denying the problem and prevent any form of public debate on Afrophobia. Cases and patterns of human rights violations affecting people of African descent are not given actual consideration by the national parliaments, political parties, politicians, and therefore the media, noted Ms Mijatović. The report also pointed to the governments' poor efforts to address the legacy of colonialism and the slave trade, and the lack of educational and awareness-raising efforts that contribute to the invisibility of the problem: "They need to tackle the roots of racism against Black people and address the legacy of the colonial past and historical slavery", she stated (Council of Europe 2021).

Regarding 'the legacy of the colonial past' it is sufficiently evident that apart from the enclave of academic world in which colonial history and legacy have been analysed consistently, the mainstream cultural institutions have shown little interest so far. How many famous novels do we know that deal with colonial history? How many best sellers or movies or TV series have represented Europe's colonial past and its long-term impact on today's relations with Africa? How many school curricula include Europe's colonial history in Africa, Asia and Latin America? How many politicians have called for a national day of mourning for all the victims of the colonial crimes committed by the British, the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Belgians, the Dutch and the Italians? Not many.

However, it is sufficiently encouraging that the international and the European institutions are now trying to make some pressure on national governments and societies to fight racism by offering a fair representation of that part of Europe's history and relations with the former colonies. As for the role of the media, if the core principles of journalism still regard the objectivity, the accuracy and the fairness in which we frame society, it is journalists who should help that process of awareness to begin. A radical change should come from their own organisation, from within, allowing non-white European media professionals to make their voice heard, to make their complex history told.

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# The *Refugee Tales* Project as Transmedia Activism and the Poetics of Listening Towards Decolonial Citizenship

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**Abstract** The *Refugee Tales* project aims to raise awareness about the experiences of asylum seekers in Britain. It pivots around a walk through the British countryside, which becomes the occasion to share tales about immigration detention, subsequently published in a series of anthologies. In this essay, I frame *Refugee Tales* as a series of activist citizen media practices, engaging in prefigurative politics by providing refugees with a chance to perform a critical form of citizenship. Finally, I discuss how the tales themselves juxtapose forms of sympathetic and hostile listening.

**Keywords** Refugee Tales. Hostile environment. Activism. Citizen media. Decolonial citizenship.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 1.1 British Migration Politics and the Hostile Environment. – 1.2 Introducing *Refugee Tales*. – 2 *Refugee Tales* as Citizen Media Practices. – 2.1 Defining Citizen Media (Practices). – 2.2 Walking as Political/Therapeutic Performance. – 2.3 Sharing Stories, Doing Collective Research. – 2.4 Connecting Activists, Performing Citizenship. – 3 The Poetics of Listening in the *Refugee Tales* Anthologies. – 3.1 Two Forms of Listening. – 3.2 “The Soldier’s Tale as Told by Neel Mukherjee”. – 4 Conclusion: Two Caveats.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 British Migration Politics and the Hostile Environment

Over the last two decades Europe has been facing, as regards migration flows, what Agustín and Jørgensen call, in opposition to the idea of a refugee/migration crisis, a “crisis of solidarity” (2019, 12). This crisis can only be understood in the context of neoliberal globalization, characterised by the “selective promotion of human mobility as an instrument to reduce salaries and rights, as well as disciplining of ethnic minorities” (Della Porta 2018, 8). Within the logic of neoliberal development, irregular migrants provide an essential flux of cheap labour, which is to be actively included into European economies by means of its criminalization (Mezzadra 2004). This dovetails with the politics of securitarian nationalism, which, by rendering migrants ‘illegal’, liable to expulsion and invisible in public spaces, conveniently turn them into a workforce that “[does] in fact move around, but largely stripped of rights” (Felli 2021, 137-8). Within this context of criminalization, exploitation and surveillance, each European country presents aspirant migrants and asylum seekers<sup>1</sup> with unique challenges.

A case in point are Britain’s migration policies since the late 1990s. During the rule of New Labour, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act established arbitrary detention as the norm for asylum seekers, whose rights and means of support were also curtailed, while refugees were mostly painted as welfare parasites (Woolley 2014, 4-5; Gallien 2018, 739). A prominent example of this attitude was Tony Blair’s 2005 speech on immigration and asylum, which, while sprinkled with multiculturalist rhetoric, nevertheless argued that stricter asylum laws were needed to “root out abuse of the asylum system” (2005). Blair’s speech relied on a widespread dichotomy between deserving/useful/legal migrants and “genuine refugees” on the one hand, and “failed asylum applicants and illegal immigrants” on the other, hiding the fact that migrants are put in one category or the other mostly depending on whether they happen to have the economic, social, cultural, or hu-

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<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses on asylum seekers, in line with the *Refugee Tales* project. The legal condition of asylum seekers is, technically, distinct from that of other categories of migrants. In many ways, however, it is dangerous to naturalize the distinction between refugees and migrants who leave their country for reasons other than avoiding war, violence, conflict, or persecution - the reasons that the 1951 Refugee Convention recognizes as valid for applying for asylum (<https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html>). That division can be unfair and discriminatory when it is used to dismiss the right to move of people that have no chance to migrate through legal channels and whose motivations (such as the desire for a better life) may be just as cogent and legitimate as those of people fleeing from persecution and violence.



man<sup>2</sup> capital to navigate the legal framework. Most importantly, this dichotomy is alive and well in the more recent plan of creating “a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants”, as Theresa May famously put in 2012 (quoted in Hill 2017). May’s hostile environment became a reality with the 2016 Immigration Act, which made ‘illegal working’ a crime, implemented provisions aimed at disrupting the daily activity of illegal immigrants, and empowered immigration officers (Fudge 2018, 558).<sup>3</sup> The hostile environment was reinforced, in the following years, through further exclusionary and punitive immigration legislation.<sup>4</sup>

One of the pillars of the British hostile environment is indefinite immigration detention. Immigration detention is an administrative procedure that involves keeping in custody those who are subject to immigration control, while they wait for permission to enter the country or wait to be deported; however, Britain is the only country in Europe in which immigration detention is indefinite, meaning that there is no limit to how long an individual can be detained (cf. AV- ID Detention 2020). Indefinite detention – a practice “arbitrary from beginning to end” (Muir 2017) – makes the British immigration system a particularly perverse one for asylum seekers: already vulnerable individuals – whose existence depends on repeatedly producing detailed and ‘believable’ narratives of their often traumatic experiences, which are then routinely scrutinized and systematically disbelieved by immigration officers – are completely put at the mercy of the state, which effectively suspends their rights, reserving the prerogative to detain them *indefinitely* in what are, for all intents and purposes, prisons, and to transfer, release and re-imprison them at whim. This system creates enormous psychological damage for those who have to endure it, which is a deliberate and integral part of the hostile environment.

## 1.2 Introducing *Refugee Tales*

It is in this context that *Refugee Tales* was conceived. An activist project started in 2014 by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, *Refugee Tales* aims to raise awareness about the experiences of asylum

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on how neoliberal citizenship can also include/exclude migrants depending on a person’s *human* capital, see Mavelli 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The hostile environment, moreover, was implemented within the context of Brexit, which mobilized racist images of the ‘refugee crisis’ to strengthen the claim to leave the EU (Mayblin 2017, 17), hence in a context of heightened xenophobia.

<sup>4</sup> Highlights include the recent, unashamedly classist point-based immigration system, and the recently approved Nationality and Borders Bill, aiming at heavily penalizing people arriving to the UK through ‘irregular’ means such as boats.

seekers in Britain, particularly those who have been through the immigration detention system. The project initially focused on the abolition of indefinite detention but has gradually evolved into a call to stop immigration detention altogether. Inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and originally subtitled "A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees", *Refugee Tales* pivots around a yearly walk through the British countryside, which becomes the occasion to share tales about migration and detention. The tales, for the most part written by established authors in collaboration with the refugees that are the protagonists of the stories, are publicly read at the stopping points of the walk during evening performances. Subsequently, they are published in a series of anthologies. To stress their shared authorship, the tales are presented as "told to" a writer.<sup>5</sup>

The four anthologies (published in 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2021) are arguably the most visible product of the *Refugee Tales* project. Including, at this point, almost sixty different tales, these anthologies register, through a variety of perspectives, the harsh and systematically cruel reality of immigration detention in the UK, while making the case that "no one flees voluntarily or without good reason, and that flight most often entails not only the loss of one's family or family members, friends, one's home, job and security, but also of one's material possessions or important personal documents" (Sandten 2020, 124). In this essay I am interested in discussing the poetics of some of these tales, but I believe that the broader context of the *Refugees Tales* project must first be taken into consideration. I follow Claire Gaillen's suggestion that "refugee literature cannot be studied out of its material context, while at the same time stressing the fact that it cannot be reduced to it" (2018, 734). In the case of *Refugees Tales*, this means not only to understand refugee narratives as both political *and* poetic interventions, but also to observe how the poetics of the tales is constructed in tandem with the wider set of transmedia activist practices that constitute the backbone of the *Refugee Tales* project.

Therefore, the rest of the essay is divided in two parts. In the next one I frame *Refugee Tales* as a series of activist citizen media practices, undertaken by a network that the project itself helps to construct. I discuss how the project, within this process of community creation, engages in a form of prefigurative politics by providing refugees with a chance to perform a critical form of citizenship which I define as decolonial.<sup>6</sup> In the final part of the essay, I stress how the tales com-

<sup>5</sup> Starting from *Refugee Tales III* (2019) some of the tales have been authored by the refugees themselves (and are presented as "told by" their authors).

<sup>6</sup> As specified in section 2.4, this use of 'decolonial' refers to Ramón Grosfoguel's attempt to combine world-system theory and decolonial thinking (2010).

plement the various practices carried out within the project by contrasting, on the one hand, the act of listening to other people's stories as an exercise in empathy, trust, and political solidarity, and, on the other hand, the unsympathetic, inquisitorial listening required of immigration officers to bring about the hostile environment. I discuss this final point – which encapsulates the politics and the poetics of the project as a whole – by commenting on a few short stories from the *Refugee Tales* anthologies, focusing on “The Soldier's Tale as told to Neel Mukherjee”.

## 2 *Refugee Tales* as Citizen Media Practices

### 2.1 Defining Citizen Media (Practices)

*Refugee Tales* lends itself to an interdisciplinary analysis, which must take into consideration how the project is also a form of refugee activism developed through different media and practices. In this sense framing the project in terms of citizen media, and specifically in terms of citizen media *practices*, may be a useful move. The former concept is defined as follows by Baker and Blaagaard:

The concept of citizen media encompasses the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics. (2016, 16)

In other words, citizen media, in this conception, indicates what unaffiliated citizens do and produce through a variety of media – including their bodies – to enact change, express themselves and, in doing so, perform their citizenship. This definition, according to which citizen media encompasses more than simple media content (and its circulation), resonates with Hilde C. Stephansen's proposal to shift the focus to the set of practices that are constructed and performed *around* citizen media.

This shift gives prominence to what people think, say, and do in relation to citizen media; to what practices people engage with that are oriented towards citizen media; and, lastly, to how these practices can structure *other* practices by reconfiguring spaces and publics (2016, 29). In particular, a practice framework highlights how

citizen media and the practices that grow around/because of them are instrumental in creating new (counter)publics,<sup>7</sup> rather than simply how media *content* circulates through already established ones. Stephansen, as Baker and Blaagaard, also relies on the idea that citizen media empower those who perform/create them and allow them to enact their citizenship (see Rodríguez 2011); and that citizenship itself is not to be understood exclusively in legalistic terms – as status, as membership to a state – but can be *constructed* through acts of citizenship (Isin 2008).<sup>8</sup>

My proposal is to see *Refugee Tales* precisely as a cohesive set of citizen media practices through which the refugees' citizenship is performed against a regime that denies them all that citizenship entails – rights, communal participation, (legal) belonging, a public voice. The advantage of reading this project through these lenses is to connect what the project does (refugee activism/advocacy through a variety of media and practices, as well as creating new communities, networks, and publics) with what the project produces (performances, short stories, media content), highlighting how the project embraces both textual/literary, digital, and performative forms of activism.

## 2.2 Walking as Political/Therapeutic Performance

As mentioned, the core of the *Refugee Tales* project is a yearly walk through the English countryside, with stops along the way in which the tales are read. So far, there have been six major walks: in 2015, from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury; in 2016, from Canterbury to Westminster via Dartford; in 2017, from Runnymede to Westminster; in 2018 from St. Albans to Westminster via the East End of London; in 2019 from Brighton to Hastings, and in 2022, from Merstham to Winchester. In 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the walk *en masse* did not take place, although small-scale walks and online events were nevertheless organized.<sup>9</sup> David Herd, one of the two co-editors of the anthologies, described the original 2015 walk

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser's definition of counterpublics, which Stephansen borrows, is: "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990, 67).

<sup>8</sup> Engin Isin defines "acts of citizenship as those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle" (2008, 39).

<sup>9</sup> In 2020 the main walk was replaced by a three-days weekend of online events that connected those who walked, from wherever they could (see RT 4, 146). The location of the individual walks was then plotted on an online map (available on <https://www.refugeetales.org/>). The same formula was repeated in 2021.

as “a spectacle of welcome” in which “people who are hidden by and from the culture, rendered invisible by the procedures of the state, were here taking and asserting their places in the landscape” (RT 1, 134). The location of this first “spectacle of welcome” was significant: the passing through of Kent, Surrey and Sussex was a “crossing of a deeply national space by people whom the nation has organised itself in order precisely that they be kept from view” (RT 1, 138). As Helen Barr comments, walking, for *Refugee Tales*, functions as a counter-narrative that displaces traditional geography by “contest[ing] those fictional pathways that keep us in our place” and allows to “tell different stories from those that our maps foreclose” (2019, 82). Of course, “different stories”, within the project, are also *literally* told when the various tales, later published in the anthologies, are read out during the evening performances.

Besides intervening performatively on a politically charged geography, the walks function as therapeutic tool for participating refugees. On the one hand, “walking with *Refugee Tales* helps former detainees to feel more at home with the new-to-them landscapes and people” (Meerzon 2020, 261). For instance, Herd points out that the first walk managed to get former detainees “more at ease”, specifically granting them a form of relief deriving “from the fact of being out and about, a way of being in space that for some hadn’t been available in several years” (RT 1, 139). One of the interviewees in a video commemorating a smaller-scale walk in 2021 – a former detainee who had trouble sleeping after his experience of detention – mentions that, while taking part to the walk, he felt tired but slept “very well” (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 03’09”-03’39”), testifying to the therapeutic aspect of the experience. Another interviewee comments on the communal nature of the walks, calling them “a very, very shared experience”, which forges bonds among the participants by having them collectively live through various hardships – bad weather, difficult stretches, tiredness – but also through the convivial act of eating together (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 03’44”-04’06”).

### 2.3 Sharing Stories, Doing Collective Research

The *Refugee Tales* walks are also spaces characterized by various forms of listening, talking and storytelling – from the informal conversations throughout the walks to the reading of the tales during the evening performances. This plays a crucial role in configuring the walks as political spaces of liberation that act against the hostile environment, mobilizing, in Emma Cox’s words, “perambulatory companionship and encounter” (2020, 488). On the one hand, the walks signify the possibility to talk freely and be listened to, which asylum seekers, and specifically detainees, do not normally have. One

of the interviewees of the previously mentioned video stresses the need, for refugees, to have “some people to hear you, to listen to you, to give you time” – he adds that since he keeps “many things inside”, he needs “someone to listen to me, to give them [to], to share” (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 05’30”-05’56”). On the other hand, the walks, as events in which the tales are publicly read, are also moments in which refugees’ voices are listened to in a more structured way.

All the ways in which the tales are disseminated, through the various channels and platforms that the project employs,<sup>10</sup> aim at raising awareness of immigration detention. But this dissemination has also an immediate benefit for the mental health of the refugees, derived from the knowledge that their stories are being circulated, even if the tales have been, for the most part, technically told by someone else. Herd comments that many people “said [...] that it was a relief that the tale [that is, *their* tale] was being told, though [...] they could not, in the immediacy of the moment, be the person who told it. More subtly, what people said was that they were relieved that the account was being passed on” (RT 1, 142). The project, in this sense, walks the line (pun intended) between the political and the therapeutic: it provides forms of relief to refugees while also contesting and denouncing the systems that have caused them harm. In this sense the project rejects the idea of ‘apolitical’ humanitarian help (see Bhimji 2020, 12), explicitly engaging with the colonial and neoliberal structures of immigration detention while also envisioning ways to provide relief to refugees in distress. Within the project, these two sides are fully intertwined.

While the very sharing of the tales advances a theoretical reflection of what immigration detention in the UK is, more recently the project has developed yet another mode to investigate and grasp the mechanisms of immigration detention, in the form of a Walking Inquiry. The inquiry was conceived to integrate and expand the conversation developed by the public inquiry into mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre – whose limited scope might convey the idea that the abuses produced within immigration detention are not systemic. The Walking Inquiry, animated by the methodological principle that “its shape and direction should be determined by people with lived experience of detention” (RT 4, 143), employed a series of events – walks, when possible, as well as online gather-

**10** The series of videos produced within the *28 Tales for 28 Days* initiative is also worth mentioning. *28 Tales for 28 Days* (<https://www.28for28.org/>) is a series of recorded readings, published between September and October 2018, in which various actors and writers (including some of those involved in the *Refugee Tales* anthologies) read out some of the short stories written within the project.

ings - to single out several questions<sup>11</sup> that, from January to June 2021, were then discussed online. Conversation was further spurred by short video entries and films by people with lived experience of detention and by people with relevant expertise. The results of the inquiry were published in 2022.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.4 Connecting Activists, Performing Citizenship

All the activities described above - the walks, including smaller monthly gatherings organized between the main events; the public reading of the tales, the publishing of the anthologies, as well as the circulation of the stories on digital platforms; and the collaborative research project of the Walking Inquiry, including its videos - ultimately result into a cohesive collection of citizen media practices that aims to promote discussion on immigration detention and enact political change, but also, most crucially, to *connect* people that are invested in this political struggle. These practices have gradually built what Herd defines a “walking community” (RT 4, 139): a network of interconnected people that walks, talks, discusses and learns together; and that includes, most importantly, people who have lived experience of immigration detention. More broadly, the various citizen media practices connected to the project create and cultivate various interwoven publics and activist communities. These encompass the participants to the walks and to the Walking Inquiry; the (co-)creators of the tales; individuals or small groups that engage in *Refugee-Tales*-inspired walks across the world or join *Refugee Tales* online events; the readership of the anthologies; and a wider network of activists engaged in social justice for refugees that the project connects and supports, also through social media, including, for instance, a Parliamentary Advocacy group led by people with detention experience that *Refugee Tales* hosts.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, what these citizen media practices have in common is to give prominence to the experience of asylum seekers and former detainees and provide them with a space - as well as a community/public - to share their stories; to empower them, as it were, to tell their stories. In doing so, the project directly counteracts the prac-

<sup>11</sup> The questions discussed by the Walking Inquiry were: “What is it like to be detained? How are people detained? What are the long-term impacts of detention? Why are people who have experienced detention not heard? How does detention damage society? What is our response?” (<https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry-read-more>)

<sup>12</sup> For more information about the workings of the Walking Inquiry, see <https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry>; also RT 4, 142-6.

<sup>13</sup> RT 4, 142; see also <https://www.refugeetales.org/about>.

tices of the British immigration system, which isolates and damages asylum seekers. Framing the struggle against immigration detention in terms of antagonistic forms of storytelling is particularly appropriate, since refugees, within the asylum system, are forced to repeatedly narrate their stories, but in a way that neither is healing nor can operate political change, but so that the ‘authenticity’ of their tales can be tested (from a position of systematic disbelief) and their access to asylum policed – a form of ‘storytelling’ akin to torture, which disempowers the storyteller. *Refugee Tales*, on the other hand, aims at connecting asylum seekers with sympathetic listeners; it allows them to talk and be listened to in multiple forms, on their own terms (which should include the right *not* to share, as stressed in the conclusion); and it allows them to enter a space of political participation where they can enact a critical notion of citizenship. The latter idea resonates with Isin and Nielsen’s idea that acts of citizenship “create a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is ‘yet to come’” (2008, 4). The citizen media practices of the *Refugee Tales* project, in other words, provide refugees the chance to perform such acts of citizenship and, in doing so, to test possibilities for alternatives to the received conception of citizenship as legalistic membership to the state.

As Huysmans and Guillaume point out, “while citizenship has been an instrument of crafting a people of equals, in which rights are universal and not a privilege, historically it has also been a vehicle for working differentiations within this universal people” (2014, 24). Opposing this exclusionary form of citizenship by sharing their tales, and hence claiming political agency out of a position of imposed powerlessness, refugees may perform a different form of citizenship compared to the one they are excluded from. The roots of the immigration system and the form of citizenship it upholds is colonial, capitalist and neoliberal – it is structured around race and the uneven world-system of modern capitalism; and it aims at limiting legal movement by facilitating the criminalization (and thus enabling the exploitation) of migrants. I would therefore argue that the acts of citizenship that *Refugee Tales* promotes can also be understood as prefigurative politics aimed at shaping a form of decolonial citizenship. Such citizenship is decolonial because it based on demolishing, rather than upholding, the “several entangled global hierarchies” (Grosfoguel 2010, 70) that constitute the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system and whose logic informs the immigration (detention) system. From this perspective, *Refugee Tales* fits the definition of citizen media (practices) presented at the beginning of this section: within this project, various unaffiliated citizens – including, crucially, asylum seekers – engage in a variety of practices and forms of content production that are aimed at enacting social change through a variety of media, which in this case means changing the public meaning of citizenship and asylum. They do so by – and while – creating new communities and publics.



### 3 The Poetics of Listening in the *Refugee Tales* Anthologies

#### 3.1 Two Forms of Listening

Among the various citizen media (practices) of *Refugee Tales*, the importance of the tales written within the project is self-explanatory - the tales are what the project mainly employs to convey information on the predicaments of refugees and are what the project coalesces around. However, what specific function do the tales as texts with their own poetics have within the project? I would argue that one way in which the tales, as texts, can be seen as an organic development of the project is by being narrative resources through which the political meaning of (not) listening to a person's story, and the capacity of stories to create community and enact change, can be properly elaborated, understood, and envisioned. Many of the tales juxtapose two different forms of listening: a sympathetic listening that is based on accepting someone else's story, and, in doing so, creates bonds and enables political possibilities; and an inquisitorial listening that is aimed at scrutinizing, disassembling, and disempowering the other's story. In doing so, the tales register - and convey in a dramatic form - the core of the political struggle that the project engages with in a variety of other media, performances, and practices.

The clash between sympathetic and hostile listening is spelt out, for instance, in "The Erased Person's Tale as told to Jonathan Wittenberg". The tale begins with a conversation between the author and S, the refugee whose story is being told. The conversation, is about the significance of asking someone *else* to tell your story:

So, I ask him, why does he want me, or anyone else, to tell his story? Wouldn't it be more powerful coming directly from him? His response is that he needs someone else to hear, a person outside the immediate experience, to acknowledge and record what happened to him and to those whose suffering he saw and shared. He wants me to be his witness, not because his narrative requires verification, but because of the fact of hearing itself: because it signifies that in a world that so often seeks to deny and disbelieve such accounts, his story has been absorbed by a listening heart. (RT 3, 110)

The relationship between writer-witness and refugee-storyteller is then summarized in explicitly political terms: "S needs me, us, to be allies" (RT 3, 110). A "listening heart", in other words, is one that can engender activist-oriented community, in stark contrast with the silencing experience of immigration detention that S endured: "You've no voice when you are inside there" (RT 3, 109).

The contrast between the two forms of listening is often dramatized by the juxtaposition of an asylum interview and a moment of empowering storytelling. For instance, in “The Arriver’s Tale as told to Abdulrazak Gurnah”, the protagonist, while waiting for his interview, passes the time by sharing stories with his fellow detainees, “[telling] each other stories of our escape from danger and death” (RT 1, 38). This brief passage entails a strong sense of comradeship, which however is destroyed as soon as the protagonist is called in for his interview:

I was interviewed for three hours by three different people. All of them were calm and persistent, but I could tell from the way they asked me questions that there was something behind it. They did not believe me and as the hours passed I began to think what I had not thought possible over the three months I had been waiting. They did not want me here. They did not like me. The result of the interview was that I was refused permission to stay. (RT 1, 38)

The interview shatters the spirit of the protagonist, who feels “as if I was something broken and discarded, thrown away with other broken things” (RT 1, 38). Similarly, “The Orphan’s Tale as told to David Constantine” begins with the equally mortifying interview of the Liberian asylum seeker M:

M wants to be believed, to persuade, to get them feel the living truth of it and be moved to pity. At first he thought the plain facts would do the trick, but when he paused in relating them he looked into faces which were dubious. [...]The harder M strove to be persuasive, the worse he became at it. [...] He slipped from trying to remember and answer in good conscience to trying to guess what they wanted him to say. Pretty soon he was all at sea and in a sudden rage he said things that would be taken down – almost sorrowfully, as it seemed – and used in evidence against him. (RT 3, 11-12)

In the passage the interview reveal itself as a trap: refugees are expected to tell the truth; but, the “plain facts” often will not do, forcing the refugees to rely on lies or on a narration that tries to appease the expectations of the officers, but that can easily backfire and be used to demolish their claims. The story ends tragically with M about to be deported, defeated by a system intended to isolate him and break him down: “sever the connections, tear the web, a human quite alone is an easy thing to manage” (RT 3, 22), he comments poignantly. But the tale also offers an example of a form of listening, which *creates* community. When M meets Céline, a woman he will eventually fall in love with, the two listen each other’s story:

She told him her story and he, hesitantly, told her his. He spoke almost in a whisper, she had to lean close, her child was at the kitchen table, drawing, and seemed absorbed. When he halted, shrugged, and said that was enough for now, they looked at one another with different eyes. Anyway, you're safe here, she said. (RT 3, 15)

The safety Céline talks about refers not only to the fact that M managed to flee from the circumstances that have led him to seek asylum, but also the fact that she offers him the chance – the time, the place, the patience, the “listening heart” – to tell his story in the way he feels comfortable with.

### 3.2 “The Soldier’s Tale as Told by Neel Mukherjee”

Among the stories published in the anthologies, “The Soldier’s Tale as told by Neel Mukherjee” deserves particular attention, because it tackles the contrast between these two forms of listening through a unique focalization. The titular soldier is Salim, an Eritrean refugee, forcibly conscripted into the army when he was about eighteen and forced to fight in various wars for six years. He subsequently manages to escape, spending several years in Sudan, where he marries and has a son, only to eventually try to reach Europe. After being sold into slavery and escaping, he arrives to Italy, where he is granted temporary leave to stay but is entirely destitute. Trying to run away from his miserable life, he finally reaches Britain, where the authorities, however, decide to deport him back to Italy. The reader’s last image of Salim is of him “still suspended in this purgatory, waiting and hoping and dreading” (RT 2, 90). While recounting the events of Salim’s journey is arguably the main political aim of the tale, the narrative device that makes the story particularly compelling is the fact that the narrator is Salim’s caseworker, who is reading and processing his asylum application.

Within the caseworker’s narrative the opposing forms of listening that I have sketched so far meet and clash. On the one hand, the caseworker acknowledges the suffering contained within asylum applications, from which the caseworker is haunted: “I read pages and pages of these every day. Sometimes just a bare mention of an atrocity, without any details, is the most troubling, leaving me to imagine the lacunae and, then, I do not know which is worse – the imagination succeeding or failing” (RT 2, 85). But the caseworker also specifies that they *have* to read them because they are “a cog in the wheel of the giant machine” of the immigration system. Their institutional role necessarily leads them to keep their sympathy in check: “you learn very quickly that you have to turn down most of them”, and to

do so you have to “insulate yourself in the face of such evidence” (RT 2, 86). But how do you reject an asylum seeker? The caseworker-narrator offers a demonstration by pointing out the inconsistencies and gaps in Salim’s application. For instance, they note that “the account of [Salim’s] time in Sudan is perfunctory, and skates so quickly over such important turning points that my suspicion, honed by years of Home Office training, cannot help but be aroused” (RT 2, 87). These are the things, the caseworker says, that “we’ve been trained to winkle out of applications and use to demolish the arguments for refugee status” (RT 1, 87). “Winkling out” accurately conveys the image of an interrogator *torturing* a subject to extract a confession.

And yet, after proving their credentials as a dutiful Home Office functionary, the caseworker admits that “something in Salim’s application gets through. Sometimes, even for the hardest of apparatchiks, a detail catches hold” (RT 2, 87). The caseworker admits that, despite its imperfect presentation, the text nevertheless manages to impact them. They eventually reveal the moment in which their armour of indifference is destroyed – when they read a specific line from Salim’s application: “I cannot see the difference between Eritrea and Europe – I’m not free in any of those places.’ And this pierces through my hard shell” (RT 2, 90). Once the “shell” is pierced – arguably by Salim’s shattering of the myth of free and civilized Europe –, the caseworker is assailed once again by the “lacunae” (RT 2, 90) – the voids in the asylum seeker’s tale that the caseworker would like to fill in. Not to invalidate the tale, this time, but to understand the actual plight of the people whose stories the process of asylum application inevitably obfuscates: “Once the questions press, the formal application is nothing; the story that is alive, the person that is alive in the story, lies in the answers to the hundreds of questions I want to ask at every turn” (RT 2, 90). But such understanding is not possible: within the space of the immigration detention system, in which the caseworker is embedded, their sympathy has no way to manifest itself in a gesture of solidarity. On the contrary: the caseworker is fully complicit in Salim’s deportation. “The Soldier’s Tale”, therefore, details the predicament of individuals reduced to a cog within a system whose injustice they can recognize but cannot – or do not bring themselves to – fight. In registering such impotent, ambivalent desire for solidarity, however, the tale makes the case for imagining and creating communities in which solidarity can engender practices of political change: physical, digital, and imaginary spaces where systems of oppression *can* be fought back, also, crucially, by those they affect the most – the whole point, I would argue, of *Refugee Tales*.

#### 4 Conclusion: Two Caveats

In this essay I discussed how the *Refugee Tales* project, since its inception, has aimed to create activist, solidarity networks through various citizen media practices, especially through moments of storytelling in which refugees are active voices; and how it has empowered refugees to participate in spaces where they could imagine different, radical forms of citizenship. *In lieu* of a conclusion, I would like to propose two correctives to some possible implications of the reflections proposed thus far.

Firstly, I have argued that *Refugee Tales* creates spaces for imagining decolonial citizenship through citizen media practices. I do not consider, however, participation to citizen media practices by refugees or refugee activists as *inherently* decolonial, but only if these practices and forms of participation *consistently* go against the interconnected hierarchies of race, class, gender and mobility, aiming towards a total liberation from these hierarchies. This means that the unaffiliated citizens that join these practices should aim for an ever-expanding struggle that gradually connects with all the categories of oppressed people within the modern/colonial world-system, and not just specific groups of oppressed people. An example that is very relevant for *Refugee Tales* concerns the slippery distinction between refugees and other migrants. While it might be tactical to focus on the fight for a fairer asylum system, in the long run a truly decolonial citizenship should be conceived with the granting of universal mobility and asylum rights in mind, aiming at a broader form of mobility justice (see Sheller 2018) instead of simply settling for a more inclusive or lenient asylum system. I believe the project *has* placed itself within this decolonial framework, but this achievement should be defended and maintained through constant theoretical reflection and engagement, and is not guaranteed by the mere fact of platforming refugees.

Secondly, because asylum and mobility should be conceived as universal rights and not as a privilege, the importance of speaking and listening that I have stressed within this essay should always coexist with a right to opacity, as Édouard Glissant puts it (1997, 194). While it is crucial to enable refugees and migrants to tell their own stories, especially as active co-participants to a political project, the role of refugees should never be reduced to that of witnesses whose value depend on their ability to tell their story, even if the telling is meant to be aligned with the liberation of refugees; and no activist should ever feel *entitled* to listen to the story of a refugee because they have contributed to create conditions in which the sharing of that story could be more humane or conjoined with more politically progressive objectives. Universal right to asylum and mobility ultimately means, in this sense, liberation from the burden of testimony as necessary prelude of recognition.

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# Migrant Multimodal Narratives: From Blogs and Print Media to YouTube

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**Abstract** Current technology places migrant narratives into a fresh, diverse and at times hybrid act of narrating. Due to the proliferation of digital media and global culture, migrants' journeys are frequently documented through various multimodal forms. The impact of new media on the body of current migrant narratives – particularly those that fall under the canon of postcolonial literature – will be explored in the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Reni Eddo-Lodge and Warsan Shire. This chapter also aims at highlighting how current technology is increasingly used as a means for people to tell their stories, so that their voices can be heard by a wider citizenship and most relevantly therefore might be used as advocacy tools for a cause.

**Keywords** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Reni Eddo-Lodge. Warsan Shire. Racism. Social engagement. Multimodal narration.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Debate on Social Engagement and Digital Storytelling. – 3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Blending Digital Writing and Print Media. – 4 Reni Eddo-Lodge: from Internet to Print Media. – 5 Warsan Shire: Return to Orality? – 6 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

The current migrants' journey from the home country to the host country, with all the material and psychological consequences of this 'passage', represents a link between by now canonical postcolonial literature and twenty-first-century migrant narratives. The condition of the country of origin in contemporary migrant narratives is often

characterised by political and/or economic crises occurring as a direct result of colonial rule, neo-colonialism, or decolonisation, as the Indian-New York-based author and journalist Suketu Mehta clearly and explicitly claims:

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. [They] built up their economies with our raw materials and our labor. [...] 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. (Mehta 2019, 3-4)

However, global culture and the proliferation of digital media have substantially affected the act of narrating. Authors are increasingly drawn to the possibilities offered by media technology and cannot help but reflect, consciously or unconsciously, models and norms of usage of the language which prevail in our contemporary world of digital media and digital production (Rylance 1994, 9-10). In the last two decades, digital productions have complemented and even supplanted print media. It is not surprising, therefore, that migrants' journeys and their marginalisation that follows upon their arrival in Western societies are depicted and disseminated according to the features and possibilities offered by the Internet platforms and new media. In this chapter I will discuss three postcolonial literary works characterised by the pervasive influence that modern technology has on migrant multimodal narratives. My intent is to shed light on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017) and Warsan Shire's *Home* (2017).<sup>1</sup> The authors in question share their views about the persisting issues of racism, migration, fragmented identity and alienation. Furthermore, these young authors also share a common usage of blogs, video-essays and web-participatory projects, even though this does not exclude by no means traditional interventions in print media.

Adichie's novel, Eddo-Lodge's collection of essays and Shire's video-poem represent three different examples of the interaction between new multimodal textual forms fostered by new media and postcolonial literature fostered by new media and postcolonial literature,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo>.

which provides a theoretical framework to interpret current migrant narratives. Due to their distinctive features, the above-mentioned works will be analysed through the lens of multimodality.

## 2 The Debate on Social Engagement and Digital Storytelling

In her philosophical reflections on the world and human affairs, Hannah Arendt states that individuals distinguish themselves through action and speech as “we exist primarily as acting and speaking beings” (Arendt 1998, 176-81). Arendt conceives the ability of telling a story as the process through which individuals reconstruct their personal experiences and enter a collective space. The notion of storytelling as a spatial practice implies focusing on how stories are shaped through interactions and how they can transform into wider, collective engagements. In literature, specifically in the case of postcolonial literature, this ability of telling a story may be compared at times to a form of social engagement as well as to forms “of emancipation, critique and transformation” (Nayar 2008, xiii).

Postcolonial literature and, by extension, contemporary migrant narratives, provide a narration that mirrors the real world in a realistic setting, under specific circumstances and, in this ability to reproduce the world back to an audience, these narratives might be regarded as a highly sophisticated laboratory for observing contemporary society. The laboratory metaphor shapes the mental image of a cutting-edge experiment involving collaboration between writers and citizens seeking to create equality, social justice and human rights guarantees. For instance, the Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips, by centring the stories and experience of people who have often been overlooked in Western culture, suggests that literature, with its potentially more inclusive scope, offers a vital tool for bridging the gaps in the mainstream, dominant culture’s version of history:

I had learnt that in a situation in which history is distorted, the literature of a people often becomes its history, its writers the keepers of the past, present, and future. In this situation a writer can infuse a people with a sense of their own unique identity and spiritually kindle the fire of resistance. (Phillips 1987, 99)

In addition to this notion that literature reflects, absorbs and explores the diversity of society, Phillips confers it the supplementary feature of social activism, already referred to as “resistance”:

As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for a change, then we have a chance. [...] for liter-

ature *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, 16; italics in the original)

That being said, the definition of postcolonial writing as “a literature of emancipation, critique and transformation” (Nayar 2008, xi-ii) reflects a common concern between by now canonical postcolonial literature and twenty-first century migrant narratives. Practices of giving voice to marginalised individuals excluded by mainstream Western history along with the attempt to raise awareness of persisting issues of racism, identity, belonging, trauma and diaspora have merely adapted themselves to changes that have been occurring over time. Current migrant narratives are both an account of events told and/or written by postcolonial authors and a first-hand testimony told and/or written by individuals who have lately made the journey. Although migrants are not a monolithic group, but originate from many regions and speak numerous languages, this chapter addresses some migrant narratives written, spoken and or visually recorded in English. Furthermore, the dichotomy between belonging and longing for home, that is to say the figurative stepping forward (into a new culture)-stepping back (into one’s roots) movement is analysed through migrant narrations by and about authors fleeing countries of origin that have a history of colonialism.

This act of narrating can integrate a variety of modes, such as words, images, audio and videos. The current, multimodal storytelling is feasible because of the considerable and user-friendly features provided by the Internet. The globally connected network system facilitates worldwide communication and allows users to interact through digital platforms such as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram along with media sharing platforms like YouTube or Vimeo. Moreover, digital platforms share the attributes of ease of use and immediate appeal for users/citizens (Landow 2006, 345). The virtual space created by digital connectivity has the power to temporarily erase national borders and catalyses feelings of belonging and longing for home offering in return a sense of digital citizenship. This virtual space which functions as the migrant’s ephemeral but inclusive, safe *locus* also simulates a highly sophisticated laboratory for understanding and promoting social and collective engagement and multimodal storytelling.

Contemporary migrants’ journey is most often expressed through the use of both words and images. This juxtaposition of words and images, of two diverse codes of conveying storytelling, requires a double reading, that is to say of the written word and of the visualised images. In a short essay “Words and Pictures” (1967), Michel Foucault argues that the relationship between “the sayable” and “the visible” along with

their coexistence and isomorphous feature merely depict the author's culture in a precise moment in history and place (Foucault 1967, 12). Moreover, in terms of multimodality, this interdisciplinary approach to storytelling may be conceptualised "as a special mode or language of representation" (Moslund 2010, 4). Furthermore, the art historian William John Thomas Mitchell describes the growing presence of the visual image as a means of conveying stories as the "pictorial turn", a moment in culture where the human face itself has gained a digital life. The consequent 'facialization' of life experience allows individuals to take a predominant role as real-life protagonists in their own real-life stories. Such double decoding is exemplified by the Internet that may become "a means of defining and communicating a newly recreated identity" (Landow 2006, 345). Although ephemeral, this digital potentiality grants a sense of sameness to individuals who are invisible, unheard and marginalised at the borders of white, Western societies.

This impact of the digital world on literature distinctly emerges in Adichie's, Eddo-Lodge's and Shire's works. These young writers, who may arguably be defined as 'digital-new-avant-garde', are just three names within the larger evolving, growing field of postcolonial and migration studies.

### 3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Blending Digital Writing and Print Media

In 2013, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie published *Americanah*, her third novel. In Adichie's novel everyday forms of electronic communication such as blogs and emails appear and blend with the narration. The female character Ifemelu moves from Nigeria to the USA with the prospect of improving her life and career. Her story begins in the host country where she writes "an anonymous blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*" (Adichie 2014, 4; italics in the original). This is Ifemelu's 'calling card' and is a foretaste of her attempts at conforming to global prevailing standards of expression along with her attempts to feel fully included in the host country. The virtual space provided by her blog allows Ifemelu, a non-African-American black immigrant, to explore issues of racism and discrimination which are deeply rooted in the American, white society. Mark Dunford and Tricia Jenkins emphasise

the importance of digital storytelling as a means to raise and amplify voices that are unheard or suppressed in public spheres as a means to find stories, to share them and then to analyse what influence the sharing of such representations can have on public discourses. (Dunford, Jenkins 2017, 7)

Ifemelu's blog represents such a virtual space, where she can "raise and amplify" her voice with the intent to interact with the social issues and concerns of the citizens of her host country.

*Americanah* is an obvious example of the junction between literature and new media. This junction involves storytelling and technology that meet to point in a new direction enabling authors to craft personal stories using imagery, text and the spoken word (Dunford, Jenkins 2001, 4). Ifemelu's blogposts may be understood as a digital attempt to, at first, comprehend - and later blend - into the culture of the host country. In essence, the virtual location functions as her "in-between space" that may:

provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjectivity and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (Bhabha 1994, 2; italics in the original)

"The emergence of the interstices", or the feeling of "in-betweenness" also introduced by Bhabha, implies at the same time the "collision of cultures", and "denotes transition, passage, process" which are actions that take place in a

liminal zone without clearly identifiable borders, where diverse cultures converge without merging. (Dingwaney, Maier 1995, 8)

In this context, Ifemelu's blog houses her reflections, her observations, her political views and her daily life in the United States where, in her eyes, "whiteness is the thing to aspire to" (Adichie 2014, 253). In the end, Ifemelu's attempts to engage in virtual conversations with her readers still remain a "liminal zone". Indeed, she does not reply to comments posted by her readers; as a counter effect, those comments nourish instead a sense of anxiety as they make her feel "eager to be fresh and to impress" (Adichie 2014, 6). Ifemelu's blog as an "in-between space" should, following Bhabha's logic, help her to create a new identity; in reality, however, the negotiation process proves to be difficult to achieve, and eventually the act of posting leaves her feeling hollow and inauthentic:

She began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false. (Adichie 2014, 6)

Nonetheless, digital stories can be used as advocacy tools for a cause:

As engagement is a subjective feeling and participation is a concrete action, it may be that participation is easier to measure; feelings of engagement must be elicited, whereas participation can be observed. (McPherson 2015, 137)

Ifemelu embodies the typical blogger figure who tracks her follower counts and engagement rates. Then, as it happens in the World Wide Web where weblogs display information in a reverse chronological order with the latest post appearing first, at the top, her first post introduced in her account of events is the last one she uploads some time before leaving for Lagos:

She had written the final post only days ago, trailed by two hundred and seventy-four comments so far. All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her. (Adichie 2014, 5)

Ifemelu's twelve posts embedded in the novel may resemble open letters addressed to an anonymous "Dear American Non-Black" on the subjects of racism, discrimination, politics, white privilege and social injustices and intended for the general, hopefully also white readership. Although, the non-African-American black immigrant Ifemelu does not seem interested in taking action, she does take advantage of her blog. The blog becomes a virtual container that holds questions and possible suggestions to overcome some racial issues at the core of the host country society:

Dear American Non-Black [...] don't put on a Let's Be Fair tone and say "But black people are racist too". Because of course we're all prejudiced (I can't even stand some of my blood relatives, grasping, selfish folks), but racism is about the power of a group and in America it's white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and [...] So after this listing of don'ts, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. [...] Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. (405-6)

As soon as Ifemelu "meld[s] into a piercing homesickness" (7) after having

scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees (7)

she definitively leaves for Nigeria, her home country and the place where being black does not stand for being the Other:

Finally, Zemaye said, “So you were a famous race blogger in America. When Aunty Onenu told us, I didn’t understand”.

“What do you mean?”

“Why race?”

“I discovered race in America and it fascinated me”.

“Hmm,” Zemaye murmured, as though she thought this, discovering race, an exotic and self-indulgent phenomenon. (499-500)

The safe *locus* created by digital connectivity, while temporarily erasing national borders, catalyses at the same time feelings of belonging and longing for home. Despite of her Western, university education, Ifemelu seems no longer able to negotiate between a culture marked by white supremacy and her own culture that does not contemplate the concept of race, as shown in the passage above. Furthermore, the act of blog writing eventually does not serve a purpose in her American life. Her blogposts neither reach a large, significant audience nor trigger serious debates among black and American Non-Black blog readers. If, on the one hand, *Americanah* shows the pervasiveness of new media in daily life, besides being characterised by different, at times hybrid, writing styles and strategies; on the other hand, it seems to emphasise the ephemerality of Weblog or of a user-generated Web site that provides commentary on a particular subject. However, Adichie’s novel witnesses the new life of books as object. Books are no longer isolated; they no longer have the function of a closed container of words, ideas and reflections: books have opened to the World Wide Web and the boundaries of writing have crossed the front and back cover to cross over into a net of multiple relationships via the World Wide Web (Cappello 2021, 11).



#### 4 Reni Eddo-Lodge: from Internet to Print Media

A further example of how new media interact with and cooperate in the field of postcolonial and current migrant narratives is the work of London-based journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge. Since March 2010, Eddo-Lodge has been communicating and displaying literary discourse on the Internet through her website and her blog, Twitter and Instagram accounts. Differently from Ifemelu's blog, which was generated with the intent to feel fully included in the host country, Eddo-Lodge, born and raised in London by a Nigerian mother, generated her blog in her home country focusing on feminism and exposing structural racism. Eddo-Lodge's blog is an example of a safe and inclusive *locus*, and represents at the same time a form of activism. In 2017, Eddo-Lodge published her first non-fiction book whose title was taken from a piece she had posted on her blog three years earlier:

On 22 February 2014, I published a post on my blog. I titled it 'Why I'm No Longer talking to White People about Race'. It read: I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. [...] After I pressed publish, the blog post took on a life of its own. Years later, I still meet new people, in different countries and different situations, who tell me that they've read it. In 2014, as the post was being linked to all over the Internet, I braced myself for the usual slew of racist comments. But the response was markedly different, so much so that it surprised me.

There was a clear racial split in how the post was received. I got lots of messages from black and brown people. There were many 'thank yous and lots of 'you've articulated my experience'. There were reports of tears and a little bit of debate about how to approach the problem, with education being rated highly as a solution to bridge the communication gap. Reading these messages was a relief". (Eddo-Lodge 2018, ix-xiii)

The responses to Eddo-Lodge's post corroborate the above analogy: individuals from different background and origin gather in her virtual space to engage in conversation, exchange ideas, life experiences and personal feelings. In this safe digital space, every individual has the right to say a word along with "the right to be understood" (Phillips 2011, 16). Ultimately, as mentioned above, the right granted by digital connectivity simultaneously allows forms of activism. Organisation of people, ideas and other resources are at the core of activism and, Brian Alleyne employs the notion of activism in the form of a

type of politically-oriented action that is conceived and deployed largely outside of established state structures. (Alleyne 2002, 2)

Furthermore, in relation to activism, Alleyne acknowledges at the same time the crucial role played by new, advanced technologies in current social movements. In this particular case, the blogger Eddo-Lodge and her readers become a group of persons, even better, an online community willing to “debate about how to approach the problem” (Eddo-Lodge 2018, xiii) of racism. Undoubtedly, the introduction of the subject of racism in the education system would be an impactful first step. Nonetheless, because of its democratic feature, in terms of representing the benefit of the people at large, the Internet’s expansiveness renders Eddo-Lodge’s blog accessible to everyone and, to some extent this may represent a starting point of approaching the persisting issue of racism in Western societies:

What I wasn’t expecting was an outpouring of emotion from white people who felt that by deciding to stop talking to white people about race, I was taking something away from the world, and that this was an absolute tragedy. ‘Heartbreaking’ seemed to be the word that best described this sentiment. [...] Another commenter pleaded: ‘Don’t stop talking to white people, your voice is clear and important, and there are ways of getting through’. (xiii-xiv)

It can be argued that Eddo-Lodge engages in a new-media, multimodal authorship. Her debut published book along with her website, blog, social media and podcasts are interconnected platforms where a collaborative, at times complex storytelling process occurs. After having “watched in disbelief” (121) Nick Griffin on television – the former British National Party leader who is a notoriously conservative, anti-migration advocate – Eddo-Lodge managed to interview him:

In his *Question Time* monologue, Griffin appealed to that British sense of fairness to conjure images of an embattled white minority under attack, losing control of their heritage and culture. Even more insultingly, he used the struggles of black and brown people who were colonised, raped and beaten by white British people to preserve white British culture. (121)

As Griffin “hardly ever goes to London, as it’s ‘largely a foreign country’” (122) to him, they agreed to speak on the phone. That “surreal” (123) phone conversation was faithfully reported in dialogically form by Eddo-Lodge in her published collection of articles.

It must be said that new media have also legitimised informal writing style strategies. Unlike in a novel, for instance, where word choice, register and tone are carefully observed and crafted to conform to the prevailing edicts of literature, as Knut Lundbly suggests, the interlocutor – Eddo-Lodge in this case – invites people to tell their own personal stories in their own words, in new accessible ways, re-

regardless of whether or not these stories satisfy accepted literary conventions. Eventually, this storytelling reflects and welcomes forms of community communication, thus ensuring democratic participation (Lundbly 2008, 124).

Moreover, Alleyne calls attention to the relevance acquired by the technological dimension in contemporary, ordinary life. Consequently, the ability to use new media is decisively important for activists wanting to constitute, expand and sustain their projects. In point of fact,

these new technologies 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, 80-1)

Evidence of these “force multipliers” are detectable, for instance, in Eddo-Lodge’s denunciations of racism, police brutality and social injustices in Britain but also in the United States where

the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement had gone global, with the new technology of smartphones shining a harsh light on long running injustices inflicted by law enforcement onto black communities, the blurry footage posted on social media, igniting the righteous rage of a new generation of activists. (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 228)

Therefore, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* may be defined as a collection of articles whose topics are racism and blackness as the Other. Eddo-Lodge deals with British history of slavery and colonialism, racism, the feminism question, social class injustices and inequalities. Eddo-Lodge’s articles contain dates and detailed facts on racism or, as defined by the author,

structural racism [that] is about how Britain’s relationship with race infects and distorts equal opportunity. (81)

Through these topics Eddo-Lodge openly takes a stand and states:

I consider myself to be part of a movement, and I think that if you are deeply touched by what you read in this book, then you are part of that movement too. It’s happening right now. (238)

Differently from postcolonial authors who committed themselves with a “literature of emancipation, critique and transformation” (Nayar 2008, xiii) relying on the publishing industry, Eddo-Lodge’s social engagement officially started on the Internet where she reached a considerable audience. Nonetheless, as she states in the preface of her first published work:

I've turned 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race' into a book - paradoxically - to continue the conversation. [...] I won't ever stop myself from speaking about race. Every voice raised against racism chips away at its power. We can't afford to stay silent. This book is an attempt to speak. (xv-xvii)

It may be argued that the freelance journalist, blog writer and activist Eddo-Lodge commits herself to the cause of social justice becoming an advocate for those individuals who are discriminated and marginalised in white, Western societies. In doing so, she relies on both the Internet and print media.

## 5 Warsan Shire: Return to Orality?

Warsan Shire is another distinguished representative of multimodal storytelling. She was born to Somali parents in Kenya and experienced first-hand the journey from her home country to Europe. Her *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, published in 2011, provides an insight into the use of colonial language by non-native speakers while simultaneously presenting first-hand, personal narratives of journeys by African migrants intended for a Western public. Shire's collection allows for a reflection on the role played by the English language over the centuries. In the colonial past, it functioned as a tool of subjugation, as emphasised by Bénédicte Ledent: "colonized by language, and excluded by language" (Ledent 2002, 99). In present times, asylum seekers are still excluded by language, specifically by the bureaucratic language spoken by European immigration officials:

They are dealing with an asylum applicant who might talk about 'witchcraft' and ritual violence in a 'dreamlike' language that challenges the bureaucratic grammar of human rights (Noo Saro-Wiwa 2016, 128-9)

The legal criteria for assessing the migrant or refugee status correspond to an idealised perception of what an asylum seeker should conform. At the borders of Western societies different cultures - the white supremacist culture and cultures of the Other - collide. Applicants are questioned, "tested and quizzed like crime suspects" (127). Communication barriers make applicants anxious as "their sense of identity is not wedded to birth certificates or utility bills" (128) and somehow conscious of the fact that the asylum process is thus marked by subjectivity:

Asylum seekers are seen as liars, vectors of disease or religious fanaticism; economic 'migrants' who are capitalising on war to enjoy the benefits of life in the UK. (127)

In particular, in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, Shire expounds the causes behind the journey made by current migrants. Her poems and short stories are real accounts of events:

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for another song, another tongue or another language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with a language I can't afford to forget. (Shire 2011, 24)

The term “tongue”, in the passage above, besides its various meanings, also characterises the feature of physicality that distinguishes Shire's short stories and poems. She seems to emphasise, through this peculiarity, that the violence experienced on an emotional level can manifest itself on the human body as if to gain visibility. If we read it from a phenomenological perspective, physicality is nothing other than

the Ego that makes the body the essential experience of the ‘presence-in-the-world’. (Merlau-Ponty 1945, 106)

Shire seems to reproduce in her writing, one of Bill Ashcroft's reflections:

The body itself has also been the literal ‘text’ on which colonization has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages. (Ashcroft 1995, 321-2)

Thanks to her living in the digital age, Shire has managed to make her voice heard, literally, through her readings available on YouTube, for example, and has thus gained great visibility. Shire is among a generation of young poets who have attracted a larger audience by initially publishing their poetry online. In 2014, the virtual visibility gained on the World Wide Web conferred her the “London's Youth Poet Laureate” title (Zakaria 2016).

Shire first became prominent through Tumblr and later on Twitter and Instagram which count thousands of followers. Besides providing immediate visibility, social media platforms encourage poets to track their follower counts and engagement rates, as said before. The number of followers recorded by Shire are more akin to a television or movie celebrity than to those of a poet. Moreover, to a larger audience, Shire is best known for collaborating in 2016 with the American singer Beyoncé on “Lemonade”, a visual album in which the singer's music is intercut with Shire's poetry. As it may be implied, Shire resorted to digital media to become more well-known

and more widely read than other poets who still rely on the traditional route of printed poetry collections and pamphlets.

Shire started as a blog writer too but, differently from Ifemelu - Adichie's character - and Eddo-Lodge, her blog reads more like a textual and visual diary that receives attention on tags rather than on any formal information, communication and reflection on issues such as racism, migration and discrimination.

However, the eclectic author takes advantage of the Facebook platform to reach Somali refugees and support their cause; she also supports the African women feminist movement along with engaging herself in conversations in the form of interviews or podcasts about racism and migration. Nonetheless, her social and political engagement do not exempt her from exploring alternative ways of storytelling. In 2017, Shire uploaded on the YouTube platform a video that

contains pictorial cinempoetic renderings and analysis. Audio is author reading her own work. (Mogge 2017)

In this video, Shire reads her poem *Home* (2'52"), which has just been printed (2022) in a collection of poetry, nonetheless it has already reached millions of virtual 'readers'. Shire's poem captures the pain and trauma of the refugees' experience and has gone viral multiple times. Shire based *Home* on a previous short story she wrote in 2009: *Conversation About Home (at the Deportation Centre)* that can be found in the earlier mentioned poetry pamphlet *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth*. The short story was inspired by a visit she made to the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome as some young refugees turned that building into their home. Arguably, that deliberate act of occupation of an African safe location in a hostile host country may be read as a paradox.

*Home* is an eight-stanza poem, it has no rhyme scheme or set metre but contains literary devices such as metonymy: "you only run for the border | when you see the whole city running as well" (12"-14"); personification: "no one leaves home | unless home chases you" (28"-29"); metaphor: "no one leaves home | unless home is the mouth of a shark [...] "the barrel of the gun" ( 2'00"-2'04"); anaphora "no one [...], than [...], unless [...]"; alliteration: "no one leaves home unless [...], home is the mouth of a shark" (06"-09"); enjambment: "the anthem under | your breath [...] fourteen men between | your legs" (1'48"-1'51"); imagery: "no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land" (48"-49"). *Home* is a poem that seeks to give voice to the people whose voices have been silenced as they deal with the constant struggles of life as refugees. The employed words, figures of speech and stylistic strategies vividly depict the journey made by refugees along with their brutal living conditions of undocumented individuals in Europe. While watching the video, the virtu-

al ‘reader’ is simultaneously present at Shire’s performance. Black and white animated drawings illustrate Shire’s lines. The rhythm of her voice becomes more intense when she explains the reasons for these inhumane journeys; her voice breaks when she describes painful moments experienced by human beings who have been forced to leave their homes; her voice fades out in the closing lines. The performance is accompanied by instrumental, soft background music. Arguably, Shire’s intermixing of poetry recital, music, moving images, graphic art packed in one performance may be envisioned as a return to orality or, borrowing Ruth Finnegan’s definition: a return to “oral art as literature” (Finnegan 2012, 3-6) whose vehicle of transmission becomes the given performance.

The lexical item “home” evokes feelings of belonging and hospitality:

Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. Robert Frost. (Phillips 2000, 179)

Nonetheless, as Shire puts forth in her poem, for migrants that place identified both as domicile and national identity can become so hostile that “you only leave home when home won’t let you stay” (Shire 2017, 0’24”-26”) and makes the unwanted resident and citizen wish to be somewhere else as “anywhere is safer than here” (Shire 2017, 02’40”-41”). It is not accidental, then, that the line “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark” has become the worldwide rallying call for refugees and their advocates.

To conclude, Camelia Crisan and Dumitru Bortun define digital stories as strong pieces of evidence to support a particular cause: the narrator/performer is the interpretative advocate for the case which is uploaded online and made available for anyone browsing the Internet and watching. Furthermore, digital stories can be tools in calling to action because they elicit emotions, they reveal the journey of their narrator, they provide first-hand account of events (Crisan Bortun 2017, 156).

## 6 Conclusions

Adichie, Eddo-Lodge and Shire's works represent different forms of narration addressing closely related topics and all, to varying degrees, exist at the intersection between formal written text and digital text, between written narration and audio/visual narration as a result of the intermingling of codes and media.

The free and widely available platform offered by the Internet based channels like YouTube and social media in general allow authors to be visible and gain an audience. According to Marshall McLuhan "the medium is the message" and the use of new media in general may be understood as the medium. This new generation of postcolonial writers relies on forms and methods that give rise to a fresh but simultaneously multimodal narration. Their work encompasses forms and practices not circumscribed to the employment of words or written stylistic strategies alone. In the current digital age, the multimodal narration in terms of communication becomes "movement of information" (McLuhan 2015, 97). In doing so, these authors address both the enduring issues of race and racism along with producing transnational political dialogue that travels across digital space, and in so doing, they create a new way to stand out in the cultural industry as well as in the World Wide Web by engaging the European audience, scholars and intellectuals in new ways of "reading/listening".

It may be argued that, this young generation of writers are creating a new literature, a sort of 'digital-new-avant-garde' movement, not to mention the expansion and reinforcement of the canon of postcolonial literature.

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# ‘Following’ Teju Cole’s ‘Black Portraitures’

## On Zigzagging Between (Digital) Literature, Photography, Art History, Music and Much More...

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**Abstract** In this chapter, I will explore ‘black portraitures’ in Teju Cole’s writings, photos, and art history lessons, while ‘following’ his journeying – geographic, literary, photographic, digital – in both his photo essays and criticism *Known and Strange Things* (2016), *Blind Spot* (2016), in his novel *Open City* (2011) and his latest essay collection *Black Paper* (2021). I intend to study his poetics, his aesthetics and his ethical stance, particularly in relation to his re-formulation of postcolonial paradigms. Intersecting trajectories with works by Caryl Phillips (*The European Tribe*, 1987) and by Johny Pitts (*Afropean. Notes from Black Europe*, 2019) will also be considered.

**Keywords** Teju Cole. Black portraitures. New media. Postcolonial theory. Black intellectuals.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Switzerland: the Gaze. Black Portraitures in the Eyes of the Beholder. – 3 Gazing/Glancing with Teju Cole, the Photographer and Art Critic. – 4 Brussels: ‘Orientalism’. Black Portraitures by Teju Cole, the Novelist. – 5 Conclusions: Opacity.

### 1 Introduction

Teju Cole is a well-known Nigerian-American intellectual, novelist, photographer, and photography critic. In his various writings, he has elaborated a diverse spectrum of portraits of intellectuals, writers, musicians, even common people and passers-by, by which to rewrite

postcolonial paradigms. What is particularly interesting in his 'black portraits' is his stereoscopic vision of Europe and of the United States, maintaining the perspective of a cosmopolitan American citizen, which allows his lessons to resonate with all those who work in the field of Postcolonial Studies in Europe.

In this specific context I will explore portraits of black subjects in Teju Cole's writings, photos, and 'art history lessons', and I will try 'to follow' and retrace his journeying - geographic, literary, and photographic. In particular, I refer to his photo-essays in *Known and Strange Things* (2016a), *Blind Spot* (2016b), and to his novel *Open City* (2011). To close the circle, I will take into consideration his latest collection of essays *Black Paper* (2021) for its metafictional discourse on Cole's own fiction writing. I shall also avail myself of highlighting intersecting trajectories that are set forth in the works and ideas of Caryl Phillips and of 'Afropean' artist Johny Pitts, who might be considered the European counterpart of Cole, with whom he shares many a trait, not least his enthusiasm in creating a new digital citizenship. Both authors have seen their fame enhanced by 'participatory media', or 'citizen media' - such as, for instance, the cooperative twitter project of short story writing, initiated by Cole - that have boosted their celebrity and allowed wider circulation to their printed works.

The purpose of my contribution, however, rests primarily with a study of Cole's poetics, his aesthetics and his ethical stance as these emerge through postcolonial representational patterns. A further objective will be an investigation into his portraits of black fellow writers, intellectuals, musicians, and painters, as well as his self-representations, and their impact on the European mind.

I used 'to follow', in inverted commas, for Teju Cole is a fan/citizen of the new media: he made experiments with twitterature, which Mark Stein also defines as "porous textuality" and "literary translocations" (Stein 2017, 143), blogging, and all possible platforms toward sharing images and chatting with intellectuals (Concilio 2016, 227-31), friends and the audience at large. One interesting example, among many others, is the exchange between Teju Cole and Amitava Kumar "Who's got the address?", on *Guernica Magazine* (2013, n.p.). To follow Teju Cole, not on the social media ("On Instagram, those who see what you have seen are called followers. The word has an eerie sound" Cole 2016b, 206), but as a scholar means, looking for intellectual and ethical models and for new modes of citizenship.

## 2 Switzerland: the Gaze. Black Portraits in the Eyes of the Beholder

In 1952 Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, one of the milestones in postcolonial theory. The Martiniquan psychiatrist who was then living and working in France, elaborated his diagnosis of a society affected by racism, by iconically describing 'a type of gaze' that produced the alienation of the Other. In a well-known passage of his clinical study, he observed the reaction of a child at the sight of a black man:

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. [...] 'Look! A Negro!' It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile. 'Look! A Negro!' Absolutely. I was beginning to enjoy myself. 'Look! A Negro!' The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself. 'Maman, look, a Negro; I'm frightened!' Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. (Fanon [1952] 1967, En. transl., 112)

In this passage, Frantz Fanon used the personal pronouns "we" and "I". He was inquiring into a very specific and particular case in which he was personally involved, as a Caribbean citizen and intellectual, in France. That "I", both autobiographical and fictional, is the focus of the gaze under scrutiny here.

This same iconic urban scene was transcribed into a London novel by the Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon just a few years later, in 1956, in the novel *The Lonely Londoners*:

[...] under the big clock in Piccadilly Tube Station. [...]. 'Mummy, look at that black man!' A little child, holding on to the mother hand, look up at Sir Galahad. 'You mustn't say that, dear!' The mother chide the child. But Galahad skin like rubber at this stage, he bend down and pat the child cheek, and the child cower and shrink and begin to cry. 'What a sweet child!' Galahad say, putting on the old English accent, 'What's your name?' (Selvon 2006, 76)

In the novel, the episode is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator, yet, when the narrator switches to free indirect speech, he reports how Galahad, one of the protagonists, also uses the first-person plural pronoun "we", including himself in this whites-vs-blacks type of gaze.

This same paradigm of 'the gaze' has been employed by Teju Cole in more recent years with a different purpose and a new lesson to

teach. Cole's collection of essays, *Known and Strange Things* (2016), starts with a piece of prose entitled *Black Body* (Cole 2016a, 3-16). This essay introduces a 'we' which includes the narrator. Teju Cole himself tells of his journey to Switzerland. More precisely, he visited the village of Leuk on "August 2, 2014: it was James Baldwin's birthday", he specifies (3). Indeed, Teju Cole is stepping in Baldwin's steps. Baldwin went to Leukerbad in 1951. Those were the years when Frantz Fanon was theorizing 'the otherness' of the black man in the heart of European capital cities.

As Cole narrates, Baldwin took refuge in a chalet belonging to his lover Lucien Happersberger's family. There he wrote his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Most importantly, he wrote an essay entitled *Stranger in the Village*, which appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953. As Teju Cole writes, "It recounts the experience of being black in an all-white village" (4). The pretext for this narrative was in fact, according to Cole, "to look at the American racial situation in the 1950s" (4). Re-visiting Switzerland with Baldwin's books in his bag and very much in his mind (actually, reading *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955), Teju Cole feels he is putting himself in Baldwin's shoes:

I call New York home even when not living there; and feel myself in all places, from New York City to rural Switzerland, the custodian of a black body, and have to find the language for all of what that means to me and to the people who look at me. The ancestor had briefly taken possession of the descendant. It was a moment of identification. In that Swiss village in the days that followed, that moment guided me. (5)

Being there, in Switzerland, sixty years later, allows Teju Cole the possibility to revise not only Baldwin's own experience, but also Fanon's theories: "From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came", Baldwin wrote (5). But the village has changed considerably since his visit, more than sixty years before. Cole writes:

They've seen blacks now; I wasn't a remarkable sight. There were a few glances at the hotel when I was checking in, and in the fine restaurant just up the road; there are always glances. There are glances in Zürich, where I spent the summer, and there are glances in New York City, which has been my home for fourteen years. There are glances all over Europe and in India. And everywhere I go outside Africa. The test is how long the glances last, whether they become stares, with what intent they occur, whether they contain any degree of hostility or mockery, and to what extent connections, money, or mode of dress shield me in these situations. To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at

especially. (The children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets). Leukerbad has changed, but in which way? (6)

Teju Cole describes people taking notice of his presence in terms of 'glances'. A much more unobtrusive form of gaze. He clearly distinguishes between 'glances' and 'stares', also noticing how racial attitudes have rather left room to classist assessments of tourists. If Baldwin's experience confirmed Fanon's perception and description, back in the 1950s, as synthesized in the sentence quoted by Cole and reproduced above, Teju Cole's experience is quite different nowadays. In the new millennium, children will be indoors playing games with new gadgets and, thanks to the new media, they are connected with the wide world. This shows how the new media give the younger generations a new global citizenship. Cole acknowledges that

Maybe some xenophobia, or racism is part of their lives; but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday Night. (6)

Thus, Teju Cole becomes conscious of a double time scale: the 1950s when Baldwin was an exception in Switzerland bringing along Jazz and Blues music in order to maintain a connection with the Harlem world where he came from, and the 2010s, when the world has become globalized and everything has changed:

At dinner, at a pizzeria, a table of British tourists stared at me. But the waitress was part black, and at the hotel one of the staff members at the spa was an older black man. "People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them", Baldwin wrote. [...] And perhaps more interesting than my not being the only black person in the village is the plain fact that many of the people I saw were also foreigners. This was the biggest change of all. (7)

That small village in the Alps was a provincial and parochial place when Baldwin set foot in it as first black man ever visiting. Nowadays, it is a well-known thermal tourist station, full of people coming from all over the world. Moreover, something else has changed, as far as culture is concerned. When Baldwin referred to the Swiss villagers, he claimed they were - more or less consciously - related to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Racine, in a way he was not, for if he looked back at his own past, he saw himself "in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive" (9). Cole disagrees and distances himself from this vision. Cole cannot believe Baldwin was serious when he ranked the Blues below Bach and Beethoven, although Cole is ready to admit that "there was a certain narrowness in received ideas of black culture in the 1950s" (9).

Nowadays, "there has [not only] been enough black cultural achievement from which to compile an all-star team" (9), but African history, too, has become more available than it was in 1953, also thanks to scholarly works. "We know better now", declares Cole. And he adds:

There's no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry, for, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, or one in which I'd prefer chamber orchestras playing baroque music to the koras of Mali. I'm happy to own all of it. This carefree confidence is, in part, the gift of time. [...] This is where I part ways with Baldwin. I disagree not with his particular sorrow but with the self-abnegation that pinned him to it. Bach, so profoundly human, is my heritage. I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait. I care for them more than some white people do, just as some white people care more for African art than I do. I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture. (10)

Moreover, while proclaiming himself American, he is also ready to share undimmed fury against any form of racism. Cole is not blind to white supremacism in the United States, to black bodies being prejudged, to the claims of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. He concludes his essay on bitter notes:

This fantasy of the disposability of black life is a constant in American history. It takes a while to understand that this disposability continues. [...] American racism has many moving parts, and has had enough centuries in which to evolve an impressive camouflage. [...] like misogyny, it is atmospheric. You don't see it at first. But understanding comes. [...] The news of the day (old news, but raw as a fresh wound) is that black American life is disposable from the point of view of policing, sentencing, economic policy, and countless terrifying forms of disregard. [...] we can't even get started on the question of reparations. Baldwin wrote "Stranger in the Village" more than sixty years ago. Now what? (16)

In spite of these closing remarks, which go back - full circle - to Baldwin's attitude in the face of racism both in Europe and in America, Teju Cole has a new and different lesson to teach us, European scholars, intellectuals, educators and teachers in Postcolonial Studies. Teju Cole, like Baldwin before him, stepped into the heart of Europe to look back at the United States, as if through an inverted telescope - the lens of Fanon's theories - thus observing racist practices from a different, more detached point of view. In the heart of Europe, Eurocentrism seems to have left room for a more open and inclusive society, where the Fanonian 'gaze' has been replaced by less insist-



ent 'glances'; where a black man claims affiliation to both Bach and Coltrane, as a common global cultural background and feels at home in Alpine Switzerland.

In his novel, *Open City*, Cole stresses once again his protagonist's hybrid affiliation to both black and white culture:

Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white. It is something I can't help noticing: I notice it each time, and try to see past it. [...] Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question. (Cole 2011, 252)

This means that the whole world can change. Baldwin is the *trait-d'union* among three artists, who create a new European or 'Afropean' intergenerational genealogy: Cole, Pitts and Phillips. Johny Pitts explicitly declares his affiliation with Caryl Phillips and Linton Kwesi Johnson:

My generation does have it easier because of the boundaries broken down by the work of Caryl and Linton, but there is a certain disjuncture between all those writers who came of age and collaborated in the 1980s and young black Britons today. It's as though all that great knowledge work was done and then not passed down as coherently as it might have been to the next generation. (Pitts 2017, 43)

Caryl Phillips, a well-known Caribbean-British novelist, dramatist and academic, born in 1958 and now living in the United States, met Baldwin ("Dinner at Jimmy's" 1987, 39-44). He also made a documentary on the artist (Phillips 2022, n.p.), and then befriended him towards the end of Baldwin's career:

I had been sitting having lunch in a restaurant in St. Paul de Vence with the American writer, James Baldwin. *La Colombe d'Or* is the sort of place where people spend more time looking at each other than at the menu. Baldwin being a local resident and possessing a very distinctive face, was clearly an object of some attention. (Phillips 1987, 19-20)

Apparently, Richard Wright's and James Baldwin's way of "defamiliarizing Europe" is similar to what Caryl Phillips does in his travelogue, *The European Tribe* (1987), which is also the inspiring source of Pitt's *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe* (2019).

Consequently, it would be possible to compare Cole's fictional journey in the heart of Europe to Johny Pitts's own real journey, *Afro-*

pean, a journey as a backpacker the author made in search of Black Europe. Pitts' photographic and literary journeying might be interpreted as the latest incursion into the debate on 'Afropolitanism' (Concilio 2018, 35-6), to use a neologism coined by Taiye Selasi in her essay *Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)*, published in 2005, and by Achille Mbembe in his essay *Afropolitanism*, published in 2007. Johny Pitts alludes to unhyphenated identity in this context (Pitts 2018, 1), but also uses the term Afropean to indicate a sociological, if not anthropological survey of the state of the art, so to speak, of Black Europe. Thus, his project has a wide scope, which mirrors his far and wide travelling all across the continent.

In my opinion Cole's project is however totally different from Pitts'. The latter's purpose *a priori* is to accomplish a socio-cultural mapping of multicultural Europe following the example of Caryl Phillips, whom he first met in Belgium (Pitts 2017, 37). Teju Cole, on the other hand, draws from his casual photographs taken around the world as well as from his incursions in Europe to *a posteriori* re-elaborate and renovate specific postcolonial paradigms, such as that of the Fanonian 'gaze'. What I mean is, more precisely, that Cole consciously reformulates and updates Fanon's lesson, while as a rule he is never afraid of using the term postcolonial, thus circumscribing his own position among postcolonial scholars. A final consideration brings me to claim that both Teju Cole's lessons in postcolonial theory and Johny Pitts' mapping of Black Europe have acquired strength, popularity and wider circulation also thanks to these two authors being celebrities of the new media, or 'citizen media' and thanks to the fact that they are themselves 'digital citizens' - so to speak, as stated by Johny Pitts: "I'm working towards a multiculturalism 2.0" (2019, n.p.).

### 3 Gazing/Glancing with Teju Cole, the Photographer and Art Critic

In keeping with the relevance of 'the gaze' in Cole's poetics, it is worth noting that to look at, to gaze, to glimpse, to observe, to see, to watch are all verbs that are enormously meaningful to Teju Cole. He writes: "To look is to see only a fraction of what one is looking at. Even in the most vigilant eye, there is a blind spot. What is missing?" (Cole 2016, 325). As a photographer and an art critic, Teju Cole is lucidly aware of the multiple implications the gaze involves. His portraits are not neutral, they are intertwined with art history, literature, musical traditions. This technique and wider cultural scope also characterize Pitts' writings and his autobiographical journey and reportage, only, he most frequently refers to pop music and street art forms, such as the (banished) graffiti by Fista in his hometown, Sheffield (Pitts 2019, 24-5).

As an interlude and after mentioning the literary portrait of Baldwin, I would quote one more among Teju Cole's portraits of black subjects, this time a photo-poetic one, from the collection *Blind Spot*, entitled *Brazzaville, February 2013*. The photograph focusses on a black child hanging onto the red railings of a boat, holding his gloved hands on it. The photo is framed as if from the outside, from the side of the turbulent waters of the River Congo. The boy wears a white shirt and black working gloves. A text accompanies the image as a sort of long narrative caption. Cole's travel journal is indeed a combination of 'textimages', not differently from what Mitchell describes as photo essays (Mitchell 1986; 1994). Cole writes:

I am intrigued by the continuity of places, by the singing line that connects them all. This singing line I have responded to in this book in the form of a lyric essay that combines photography and text. (Cole 2016b, 324)

In the caption Cole alludes to the boy as a Christ-like figure, holding onto a cross and wearing a white shroud, as an angel and then as Saint Christopher transporting Christ to the other bank. "The child moves among metaphors", he writes, evidently thinking of religious iconography in art history. But the instant the photo is taken, the child has lowered his head and his eyes disappear. The child has a face but not a gaze (22). At a later stage, at the end of the collection, Cole reproduces the same chapter and image, but with a different narrative/caption: a new scan of the photograph reveals different colours and the eyes of the boy reappear. "Darkness is not empty", notices Cole, it is latent information (322). This time, the boy with his large eyes is compared to a sculpted Mangaaka, a juridical, magical, and spiritual sentinel, which/who was believed to protect Congolese inland villages from white invaders and cultural capitulation, with its white metallic eyes and iron irises. Here, the boy has a double vision: he looks outward, a sentinel on the lookout, but he is also looking inside himself (322).

On this second occasion, Teju Cole leaves aside Judeo-Christian iconology, to turn to specific African iconology and art, referring to colonial times in Congo, when villages were surrendering to European influences. In an effort to react to this crisis of civilization, the Mangaaka were made bigger and more statuesque. Thus, it is clear that, in order to understand Cole's 'portraits', one must 'follow' Teju Cole - literally, step by step, - zig-zagging, as if walking over stepping stones, through his photographs, captions, narratives, aesthetic, poetical, and ethical visions. Or, as he says "photography, literature, music, travel, politics" (Cole 2016a, xiv), as a mode of "working in a new genre - a genre I was developing myself - the rhythm of text and image" (Paulson 2022, n.p.). Not differently, Siri Hustvedt writes

about her own experience in reading Teju Cole: "I follow a meandering, not a straight path, one that branches into many paths, paths that then cross and recross over the course of my journey through the book" (Hustvedt 2016b, xi).

#### **4 Brussels: 'Orientalism'. Black Portraits by Teju Cole, the Novelist**

In his novel *Open City* (2011), Teju Cole's narrator is a young black man, Julius, of half Nigerian, half German origins, who lives and works in New York as a psychiatrist. The temptation to see in this choice an homage to Frantz Fanon is quite irresistible. Thus, one of the elements which help the reader to avoid identifying the narrator with the author is that Julius is a modern *flâneur*, whose never-ending walks across New York city streets and parks unveil the multifarious strata and most secret history of the North-American metropolis. Since the novel is an homage to the city of New York, the flight of the protagonist to Brussels, to the heart of Europe, might strike readers as surprising. It must be said, however, that Teju Cole has travelled often to Germany, Belgium and Austria for his scholarly studies as art historian (Cole 2016b, 228), and in this sense Julius might function as a sort of alter ego, although, as suggested, the identification should not be overrated. Why Brussels, then? This is also the question a fellow passenger asks the protagonist on the plane from New York to Brussels (Cole 2011, 93). To this, Julius answers he wants to look for his old grandmother, his Oma, whose traces he had lost.

As Teju Cole followed the steps of James Baldwin to a small village in Switzerland, in the same way, Julius somehow follows the steps of Joseph Conrad to explore and put to the test another landmark of postcolonial history. In Brussels, Julius visits the Parc du Cinquantenaire in a passage that deserves being quoted:

It was covered in fog, but this made the scale of the monuments seem even bigger. The already gigantic arcades shot up vertiginously and lost their heads in faint white veils [...] The parc, built by a heartless king, was also of inhuman scale. [...] Under the arcade was a bronze plaque displaying in relief the portraits of the first five Belgian kings: Leopold I, Leopold II, Albert I, Leopold III, and Baudouin, and beneath it an inscription that read: HOMMAGE A LA DYNASTIE LA BELGIQUE ET LE CONGO, RECONNAISSANTS, MDCCCXXXI. (Cole 2011, 100)

The monuments here described celebrate Belgian colonial history with colossal monumentality, to the point that tourists visiting the place look dwarfed by the architectural structure of the white arches

that stand majestically in the park. They were built in 1880 by Leopold II to celebrate Belgian independence. Ironically enough, Leopold II was responsible for the colonization of Congo. And this was exactly the matter in Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899):

I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire, and make no end of coin by trade". (Conrad [1899] 2007, 11)

Conrad knew all that first hand, for he travelled along the river Congo in a boat called *Roi des Belges* in 1890. About Conrad's novel Teju Cole writes in *Natives on the Boat* (2016a, 17-24):

*Heart of Darkness* was written when rapacious extraction of African resources by European adventure was gospel truth - as it still is. The book helped create the questions that occupy us till this day. What does it mean to write about others? More pressingly, who are the articulate "we"? In *Heart of Darkness*, the natives - the niggers, as they are called in the book, the word falling each time like a lance - speak only twice, once to express enthusiasm for cannibalism, then later, to bring the barely articulate report "Mistah Kurtz, he dead". Otherwise, these niggers, these savages, are little more than shadows and violence, either pressed into dumb service on the boat, or launching dumb, grieved, uncomprehending, and deadly attacks on it from the shore. Not only is this primitive, subhuman Africa incoherent to any African, it is incoherent to any right-thinking non-African, too. A hundred years ago, it was taken as the commonplace truth; it wasn't outside the mainstream of European opinions about Africans. But we have all moved on. Those things are in the past. Are they not? (21)

In this comment, Teju Cole nonchalantly rephrases Chinua Achebe's famous critical evaluation of Conrad's work. The pretext is a visit to Vidia Naipaul in a panoramic room in New York City somehow doubled by a boat-like rooftop location in London. It is undoubtedly thanks to Achebe, and to Cole now, but also to Naipaul, and to post-colonial writers and intellectuals more in general, if we have 'moved on'. The same location in London hosted - among others - both Caryl Phillips and Johny Pitts' project *A Bend in the River*,<sup>1</sup> both 'em-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://abendintheriver.artangel.org.uk/>.

barked', so to speak, in the attempt to look at a variety of multicultural London views, through genealogies of Black writers, from V.S. Naipaul to Sam Selvon, bridging the two through images of the city in T.S. Eliot's lines in *The Waste Land*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Hauthal 2019, 3-4).

And yet, Achebe's lesson is worth revisiting, as ironically hinted at in the rhetorical question asked in the passage quoted above, and Cole's lesson resonates from New York, to London, to Brussels.

Conrad made Marlow travel from Britain to the heart of colonial Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Brussels was one of the colonial capitals of the time, a city pivoting around trade, money and an overseas empire. Teju Cole makes Julius, a German-Nigerian New Yorker, travel from New York City to the same European capital in the new millennium. Their descriptions of the monumentality of the city slightly overlap: "a broad-headed horse stood by a carriage - I stood under the arcade", says Julius; "imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar", says Marlow (Conrad [1899] 2007, 11).

Brussels has changed since Conrad's time. From being the centre of an empire in Africa, it has now become the centre of the European Union's main institutions. It has maintained its supremacy and its character as a financial, political and commercial centre:

It is easy to have the wrong idea about Brussels. One thinks of it as a technocrats' city, and because it was so central to the formation of the European Union, the assumption is that it is a new city, built, or at least expanded, expressly for that purpose. Brussels is old - a peculiar European oldness, which is manifested in stone. (Cole 2011, 97)

It is exactly that oldness that allows for the *trait-d'union* between Marlow and Julius, the colonial and the postcolonial subject. On the plane which brought Julius there, an elderly woman told him that "Brussels is colour blind in a way the U.S. is not" (89). This is the lesson Teju Cole wants us and Julius to put to the test. Like Switzerland, Belgium too has changed. It has become more hospitable and it has evolved into a postcolonial capital:

now it is ninety-five per cent Walloon and other French speakers, one per cent Flemish, and four percent Arab and African. (96)

There were many people, many more than I had seen in other European cities, who gave the impression of having just arrived from a sun-suffused elsewhere. [...] Islam, in its conservative form, was on constant view, though it was not clear to me why this should be so: Belgium had not had a strong colonial relationship with any

country in North Africa. But this was the European reality now, in which borders were flexible. There was a palpable psychological pressure in the city. (98)

The last remark in this passage brings back the Fanonian sensitivity to psychological tensions in multi-ethnic societies. Julius is well-aware that the right wing is encouraging racist beliefs that tend to target Arabs and Muslims for petty violence in the city: a fact that, seemingly contradicts the assumption about its colour-blindness. But it is evident that things change rapidly in this big city, according to the moment, and that political parties swing with the currents and the climate of the specific moment.

Most interestingly, Julius meets a student in an Internet Café and starts with him an engaging conversation on 'orientalism'. Farouq is the name of the student, he comes from Tétouan, in Morocco. While working as a cashier, he is intent on reading a novel in English. In order to start a conversation, Julius says he has just finished a novel by Tahar Ben Jelloun. Julius' reference to Ben Jelloun is more a provocation than a convinced engagement in anti-racist or anti-orientalist discourses. Julius' disengagement is a quality that Mark Stein, among others, has pointed out: "Julius typically does not engage personally, but rather in an abstract, impersonal way" (Stein 2017, 148).

Farouq knows the writer, acknowledges Ben Jelloun has a reputation, but soon slips into criticizing him for offering the western audience an orientalist and exoticized version of Morocco, while also representing the 'poeticity' of the exiled intellectual abroad (Cole 2011, 104). Julius claims he liked the novel *Corruption* by Ben Jelloun, but Farouq insists that there are other writers, less known and writing in the local languages, who represent the reality of the country better; for instance, and as an alternative, he mentions Mohamed Choukri's novel *For Bread Alone*. However, the book is known as a controversial translation by Paul Bowles: not from the original Arabic, but from oral conversations between the authors partly in French and in English.

On his part, Farouq is reading an essay on Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, and claims he admires Edward Said, the Palestinian scholar, author, among other things, of the well-known post-colonial milestone *Orientalism*. Thus, in this climactic central passage in the novel, in Brussels - of all places - Fanon meets Said, so to speak, via Ben Jelloun and Benjamin, all of them being intellectual exiles. Thus, a Nigerian and a Moroccan discuss postcolonial issues - 'the victimized Other' - in the very place where Conrad's Marlow symbolically embarked on his colonial exploration of the river Congo. Farouq also admires Malcom X, from a philosophical point of view, for he was more radical than Martin Luther King.

When alone, Julius the psychiatrist, in the shoes of Fanon, so to speak, analyses the situation:

What Farouq got on the trams wasn't a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering barely contained fear. The classic anti-immigrant view, which saw them as enemies competing for scarce resources, was converging with a renewed fear of Islam. [...] It occurred to me, too, that I was in a situation not so radically different from Farouq's. (Cole 2011, 106)

Julius, with his analytical mind, examines the social and political situation in Brussels, which is "shared the world over", he claims. Cheap violence and xenophobia in the name of a monolithic identity are like a huge wave advancing over Europe. Julius's analysis of the existing social tension towards the Islamic community proves correct and Teju Cole sounds predictive, too, for Brussels was the theatre of a terrorist attack on March 22, 2016. By then, the Islamic population accounted for 25.5% in Brussels, against 12% of London Muslims, for instance.

Farouq has a friend named Khalil whom he wants to introduce to Julius. So, the three of them meet and go to a sort of pub on a Saturday night. Before that encounter, Julius immerses himself in the reading of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, by now a classic and a cult of photographic semiotic theory. They discuss political philosophy and "portrayals" (Cole 2011, 119):

The American blacks [...] They are victims of the same portrayals as we are, Farouq said. Khalil agreed with him. The same portrayal, I said, but that's how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal. They nodded. (Cole 2022, 119)

This analysis of 'the portrayal' and of who has the power to portray whom, reminds one of Salman Rushdie's famous passage in *Satanic Verses* claiming that "They have the power of description", by which he meant that the British, or the West, the media and their propaganda have the power to turn the immigrants into monsters, to dehumanize them. The conversation with Julius then slips to Al Qaeda and the Twin Towers' attack, which the two Arab men do not openly condemn, while they express their concern about the Palestinian situation. The real question of our times, they say.

They then discuss Sharia, religion, discrimination of Muslims in the United States; finally, Farouq reveals that his dream was to go to Europe to study and in Brussels he wanted to pursue an MA in "critical theory": "I wanted to be the next Edward Said!" and therefore he studied comparative literature in order to gain access to societal critique, then wrote a thesis on Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. The thesis was rejected on the basis of plagiarism. Yet, Farouq is convinced that the reason for that rejection was racism in the wake of 9/11 events. The committee had met on September 20, 2001 and had possibly been influenced by "everything happening in the head-



lines" (Cole 2011, 128). Thus, the dream of completing his PhD, nurtured by political philosophy and critical theory, vanished when he was 25, in Europe. Farouq resorted to his second choice, a degree in Translation Studies at the University of Liège - indeed, one of the European institutions with a qualified reputation in postcolonial and Caribbean studies.

With this type of 'portraiture', Teju Cole possibly meant to warn us Europeans about a smouldering new generation of 'hungry young men', - those from the Parisian *banlieues*, as well as those from Brussels peripheries - all disillusioned by Europe and its promises ("Europe was a dream. Not just a dream, it was the dream: it represented the freedom of thought", Cole 2011, 122). Europe, at the very heart of its constitution and institution, is not able - or no longer able - to confirm its asset of being colour blind in a way North America is not.

The homage to Edward Said becomes clearer in Teju Cole's *Black Paper* (2021) where he writes a chapter dedicated to Said and to Beethoven, in a metanarrative comment on his fiction writing in *Open City: "A Quartet for Edward Said"* (2021, 60-74). When Julius/Fanon met Farouq/Said, Teju Cole reflects:

I think back to where my mind was when I wrote this passage. "I wanted to be the next Edward Said!" Where had that come from? I hadn't given the line to my difficult and occasionally unlikeable narrator. I had given it to Farouq, a second character, a young man with whom I felt more sympathetic. So, was it that I wanted to be the next Edward Said myself? [...] Writing fiction often contains an element of self-hypnosis, of flying in the dark. [...] What I wanted to set down was the idea that Edward Said - what he wrote and who he was - was a kind of navigational help, [...]. We were not supposed to become him [...]. The idea was to be in communication with his intuitions, and through them find our own way through the night. (70-1)

Johny Pitts, too, visits the *banlieues* in the context of a systematic and even more predictable tour of Europe's Black quarters, with François Maspero's *Roissy Express* ready at hand

in which the writer, along with photographer Anaïk Frantz, journeyed into the no-man's-land of Paris's suburbs and eloquently depicted the tensions bubbling in the *banlieues*, prophesying that the margins of French society were about to explode. (Pitts 2017, 65)

Pitts, too, quotes Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Aimé Césaire and postcolonial scholars in a constant erudite dialogue between the academic intellectuals of the past and the gaze from the street of his own generation of youths. Yet, Cole uses casual snapshots, tak-

en all over the world in various countries as a pre-text for what I defined his up-dated postcolonial lessons. Whereas Pitt displays a well-planned research project meant to put to the fore the Black presence and the Black culture of Europe, with sparse black and white photos to document it.

More importantly, Pitts visits Brussels as Teju Cole had done, reminiscent of the mass murder of Congolese under the reign of King Leopold II. In Brussels Johnny Pitts is the victim of two Moroccan pickpockets, not differently from Cole's protagonist, Julius, who falls victim to two youngsters who beat him savagely. Pitts visits a neighbourhood in Brussels called Matongé, where he goes to a concert by Marie Daulne, a Congolese-Belgian vocalist who blends Pygmy melodies into a wider international musical tradition:

Her *raison d'être* was to sing her culture into existence by working within African traditions that had almost been lost to colonialism, and to translate and transmit them in tandem with her adoptive European culture, refusing to allow hegemony to creep in. (Pitts 2019, 95)

The disco-club is also a mix of people, a true 'Afropea'. Similarly, the Art Gallery he visits – *Galerie Lumières d'Afriques* – hosts the works of Mufuki Mukuna, a Belgian artist of African descent who “was trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and sees his art as Belgian in style but personal in content” (88). Finally, the African Restaurant *Soleil d'Afrique* also shows people of various ethnicities enjoying their dinner. This, too, is a true and realized 'Afropea' (101). A place of multiple allegiances, or, as Mark Stein writes, an example of “translocation and porosity” (Stein 2017, 148), this is also a place for a new kind of citizenship.

## 5 Conclusions: Opacity

When Teju Cole discusses photography and the civil rights movement in *A True Picture of Black Skin* (Cole 2016a, 144-51), he once again shows how 'portraits' tell both visible and invisible stories.

One such image left me short of breath the first time I saw it. It's of a young woman whose face is at once relaxed and intense. She is apparently in bright sunshine, but both her face and the rest of the picture give off a feeling of modulated darkness; we can see her beautiful features, but they are underlit somehow. (144)

In this essay Teju Cole describes a photograph by Roy DeCarava, entitled *Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington D.C., 1963*. Soon,

his essay turns into a lesson on the history of photography, including its material history. With admiration, Cole defines DeCarava as "one of the most intriguing and poetic of American photographers" (145). Cole admires both the photographer's choice of subjects and his technique:

DeCarava took photographs of white people tenderly but seldom. Black life was his greater love and steadier commitment. With his camera he tried to think through the peculiar challenge of shooting black subjects at a time when appearance, in both senses (the way black people looked and the very presence of black people), was under question. (145-6)

The photograph under scrutiny here is technically a masterpiece, according to Teju Cole, although he never uses hyperbolic statements and manages to persuade and convince by force of argumentation. Teju Cole highlights how difficult it was to take pictures of black people when films' standards were tested and calibrated on white skin. Even the best brands, such as Kodak, for instance, failed in terms of film quality and inclusiveness, advertising for instance Shirley cards, "so named after the white model who was featured on them and whose whiteness was marked on the cards as normal" (146).

DeCarava worked through these limitations:

the chiaroscuro effects came from technical choices: a combination of exposure manipulation, darkroom virtuosity, and occasionally printing on soft paper".

According to Cole, DeCarava pushed the white towards the grey, "specifically as a photographer of black skin" (147). He never tried to brighten blackness, he rather managed to darken it further. "What is dark is neither blank nor empty" (147), writes Cole to explain DeCarava's achievements but also echoing the description of the picture he took at Brazzaville, on the River Congo, when he defined the invisible gaze of the black child as not empty, but latent.

DeCarava reminds Teju Cole of the anti-colonial Martiniquan-French philosopher Édouard Glissant. In particular, Cole here refers to the concept of opacity: "a right to not have to be understood on others' terms". Glissant's idea of defending

the opacity, obscurity and inscrutability of Caribbean blacks and other marginalized peoples holds true for Carava, too. (148)

"Keeping faith with the power of shadows" (149) or "playing in the dark" (147), to quote Tony Morrison, is an uncompromising way to portray black subjects, within a postcolonial framework of referenc-

es, all of which Teju Cole purposefully embeds in his writings. Fanon, Said, Glissant are not dated references, but rather scholars whose teachings Cole revives and revises, flashing them in front of our eyes as lighthouses, while projecting the history of photography and the history of black civil rights movements from the origins to nowadays' *Black Lives Matter*.

Cole's portraits are eye-openers to us in Europe: a mirror for our unmotivated fears, prejudices, or blindness – "We, all of us, are prone to these debilitating forms of blindness" (Hustvedt 2016b, x; xv) – but told from the point of view of a scholar whose vision as a photographer, creative writer, intellectual and critic has been possibly sharpened by a visual defect, a temporary 'blind spot' (Cole 2016b, 80; 2011, 239), which gives us, too, a different angle of vision from where to observe our reality: not the invisible, that is the symbolic, the allusive, or elusive, but the visible, that is blackness itself. Thus, in the end, Cole's literary and critical works evolve, revolve, and involve his aesthetic lessons. Cole concludes his essay with the following words:

It is as if the world, in its careless way, had been saying, 'You people are simply too dark,' and these artists, intent on obliterating this absurd way of thinking, had quietly responded, 'But you have no idea how dark we yet may be, nor what that darkness may contain.' (Cole 2016a, 115)

Teju Cole always shows us a third way: in a culture that tends to value black people for their abilities to jump, dance or otherwise entertain, or devalue them as disposable lives, there are always images and words that show in the first place not what is invisible, but what is visible, or, simply, that black lives and black bodies matter.

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## **Section 5**

### Notes on Contributors





## Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe

edited by Bolette B. Blaagaard, Sabrina Marchetti,  
Sandra Ponzanesi, Shaul Bassi

# Notes on Contributors

**Omar Al-Ghazzi** is Associate Professor in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. He works on the geopolitics of global communications, particularly in relation to news media and popular culture. He has published on the political contestation of narratives around digital technologies, as well as representations of time and memory, with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa. He is co-editor of the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

**Shaul Bassi** is Professor of English and Postcolonial Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where he directs the Master's Degree in Environmental Humanities. His publications include *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare* (co-edited with Laura Tosi, 2011), *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (co-edited with Annalisa Oboe, 2011), *Shakespeare's Italy and Italy's Shakespeare. Place, 'Race', and Politics* (2016), *The Merchant 'in' Venice. Shakespeare in the Ghetto* (co-edited with Carol Chillington Rutter, 2021), and *Turbo Road. Il Kenya, i suoi scrittori, un bambino* (2022). He is the co-founder and former director of Venice international literary festival Incroci di civiltà.

**Bolette B. Blaagaard** is Associate Professor of Communication at Aalborg University, Copenhagen. Her research focuses on the intersections of culture and journalism with an emphasis on citizen media and postcoloniality. Blaagaard has published on this topic in international journals including *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Visual Communications*, and *Journalism Studies*. Most recently, she published the book *Citizen Journalism as Conceptual Practice* (Rowman & Littlefield), co-edited *Citizen Media and Public Spaces* (Routledge 2016) with Mona Baker, and *Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media* with Mona Baker, Henry Jones and Luis Pérez-González.

**Luigi Carmine Cazzato** was born in Lecce (Italy); BA (University of Pisa, Italy), MA (University of Leicester, England), PhD (University of Bari ALDO MORO, Italy). He is Full Professor at the University of Bari, where he currently teaches Cultures in English and Decoloniality. He is a member of the international research group Un/Walling the Mediterranean. From 2016 up to 2019, he was AISCLI vice-chair. Moreover, he is in the board of the PhD School "Science of Human Relationships" and is the Director of the MA in Journalism at the University of Bari. He has published extensively on the

cultural relations between England and Italy – and on the South at large, Palestine included – from a postcolonial and decolonial perspective. His last volume is *Sguardo inglese e Mediterraneo italiano. Alle radici del meridionismo* (Milano 2017).

**Lilie Chouliaraki** is Professor of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her most recent work is on the cultural politics of victimhood in western societies, forthcoming in Columbia University Press. Other book publications include *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006), *The Ironic Spectator. Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (2013), *The Routledge Handbook of Humanitarian Communication* (co-ed, 2021) and *The Digital Border. Migration, Technology, Power* (co-authored, New York University Press, 2022).

**Carmen Concilio** is full professor of English and Postcolonial literature at the University of Torino, Italy. She is former president of AISCLI ([www.aiscli.it](http://www.aiscli.it)). She has recently co-edited *Trees in Literature and the Arts. HumanAroboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene* (Lexington, 2021); she published *Imaging Ageing Representations of Age and Ageing in Anglophone Literature* (Transcript, 2018) and *New Critical Patterns in Postcolonial Discourse. Historical Traumas and Environmental Issues* (Trauben, 2012). Her research fields are postcolonial studies, migration and diaspora studies, digital humanities, precarity studies, environmental humanities, eco-literature and ecocriticism. She is involved in academic journals, such as *Il Tolomeo*, *de-genere*, and editorial series, such as *AngloSophia: Studi di Letteratura e Cultura Inglese* (Mimesis). She is part of national and international research networks in the field of postcolonial culture, ageing studies and environmental studies.

**Lucio De Capitani** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where he completed his PhD in Modern Languages, Cultures and Societies and Linguistics (English literature). His research interests include colonial and postcolonial literatures (especially Indian writing in English, the work of Amitav Ghosh and Robert Louis Stevenson), the theories of world literature, the intersections between anthropology and literary studies, and postcolonial ecocriticism. He has published articles on Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Frank Westerman. Between 2019 and 2021, he collaborated with the activities of the FAMI IMPACT Veneto Project, aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue in a high school setting, as a research fellow.

**Nadica Denić** is a PhD Candidate at Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), as part of the department of Media Studies at University of Amsterdam. Her NWO-funded PhD research, entitled *Cinematic Ethics of Migration: Auto-ethnographic Migrant Perspectives in Contemporary Documentary*, examines how auto-ethnographic documentaries about migration afford affective and ethical engagement with migration experiences. Before starting her PhD, Denić obtained a research MA degree in Media Studies at the UvA, and a BA degree in Film Studies and Philosophy at Amsterdam University College. She works as a film curator alongside her research, currently for the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA).

**Giulia Fabbri** completed a PhD in Gender Studies in 2020 and a Postdoctoral Fellowship in 2022 at Sapienza Università di Roma. She is the author of *Sguardi (post) coloniali. Genere, razza e politiche della visibilità* (Ombre Corte, 2021) and has published articles in national and international journals. Her research interests include gender and racial representations in the Italian colonial and postcolonial context, contemporary social media activism, food studies and the cultural production of

Italian women of African descent. She is the co-editor of *Intersectional Italy, Special Issue of the Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2022).

**Maria Festa** is a PhD student at the University of Torino, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and Modern Cultures. Her research focuses on Anglophone Postcolonial Literature and digital storytelling. She has published reviews, short articles and essays. Her publications include “Teju Cole’s Narrative through Words and Images” in Carmen Concilio and Maria Festa (eds), *Word and Image in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Mimesis International, 2016) and *History and Race in Caryl Phillips’s The Nature of Blood* (ibidem Press, 2020).

**Graham Huggan** teaches in the School of English at the University of Leeds. His research straddles three fields – postcolonial studies, tourism studies, and environmental humanities – all of which are represented in his most recent monograph, *Colonialism, Culture, Whales: The Cetacean Quartet* (Bloomsbury, 2018). His most recent, co-authored book is *Modern British Nature Writing, 1789–2020: Land Lines*, which was published in 2022 by Cambridge University Press.

**Alessandro Jedlowski** is a researcher in sociology of media and communication at the University of Rome 3 (Italy). He conducts research on African media, globalisation and migration, with a particular focus on Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire and Ethiopia, and has published widely on these topics.

**Redi Koobak** is Chancellor’s Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Strathclyde, UK. Her research interests include feminist visual culture studies; intersections of postcolonialism and postsocialism; cultural representations of gender, war, and nationalism; transnational and local feminisms; and creative writing methodologies. Koobak is the author of the monograph *Whirling Stories: Postsocialist Feminist Imaginaries and the Visual Arts* (2013) and the co-editor, with Madina Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, of *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice* (Routledge, 2021). She is the co-editor of *European Journal of Women’s Studies*.

**Gabriele Lazzari** is a Lecturer in contemporary literature at the University of Surrey, UK. He is working on a book (under contract with Bloomsbury Academic) titled *New Global Realism: Thinking Totality in the Contemporary Novel*. The book theorises the emergence of a new global realism through a comparative analysis of contemporary novels that foreground migration, colonial histories, and uneven development. Dr Lazzari’s work has appeared in *Comparative Literature*, *Research in African Literatures*, *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, and *Public Books*.

**Vittorio Longhi** is an Italian journalist of Eritrean origin. His writing has been published across a range of media, including *The Guardian*, the *International New York Times* and *La Repubblica*. Since 2007 he has trained journalists and media professionals on behalf of various United Nations’ agencies. In 2012 he founded and edited the online news site Equal Times in Brussels and in 2017 he contributed to create the event Afropean Bridges, at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. He is the author of *The Immigrant War: A Global Movement Against Discrimination and Exploitation* (Policy Press, 2012) and, more recently, of the memoir *Il Colore del Nome* (Solferino, 2021).

**Sabrina Marchetti** is Associate Professor in Sociology at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. She is mainly specialised on issues of gender, racism, labour and migration,

with a specific focus on the question of migrant domestic and care work. She has been the Principal Investigator of a Starting Grant project funded by the European Research Council entitled *DomEQUAL: Paid Domestic Work and Global Inequalities* (2016-21) about the labour rights of paid domestic and care workers in India, Philippines, Taiwan, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Germany, Italy and Spain. She is currently the coordinator of the Italian team for the H2020 research project *VULNER: Vulnerabilities Under the Global Protection Regime* (2020-23) coordinated by the Max Planck Institute in Halle. Her recent books are *Global Domestic Workers: Intersectional Inequalities and Struggles for Rights* (Bristol University Press, 2021, with Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and Daniela Cherubini) and *Migration and Domestic Work* (Springer, 2022).

**Frances Negrón-Muntaner** is a filmmaker, writer, scholar, and professor at Columbia University, where she is also the founding curator of the Latino Arts and Activism Archive. Among her books and publications are: *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (CHOICE Award, 2004), *The Latino Media Gap* (2014), and *Sovereign Acts: Contesting Colonialism in Native Nations and Latinx America* (2017). She has received various recognitions, including the United Nations' Rapid Response Media Mechanism designation as a global expert in the areas of mass media and Latin/o American studies (2008); the Lenfest Award, (2012), the Latin American Studies Association's Frank Bonilla Public Intellectual Award (2019), and the Premio Borimix from the Society for Educational Arts in New York (2019). Negrón-Muntaner served as director of Columbia's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race from 2009 to 2016 and co-director of Unpayable Debt, a working group that studied debt regimes in the world. Her most recent films and art works include *War for Guam* (2015), *Life Outside* (2016), and *Valor y Cambio*, an art, digital storytelling and just economy project in Puerto Rico and New York.

**Sandra Ponzanesi** is Chair and Professor of Media, Gender and Postcolonial Studies, at the Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, NL. She was PI of the PIN project *Postcolonial Intellectuals and their European Publics* funded by NWO (Dutch Research Council) in collaboration with many European partners and director of the PCI (Postcolonial Studies Initiative). She has published widely in the field of media, postcolonial studies, digital migration and cinema with a particular focus on Postcolonial Europe from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives. Among her publications are *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Suny, 2004), *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (Palgrave, 2014), *Gender, Globalisation and Violence* (Routledge, 2014). She is also co-editor of *Migrant Cartographies* (Lexington Books, 2005) with Daniella Merolla, *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Routledge, 2012) with Marguerite Waller, *Deconstructing Europe* (Routledge, 2012) with Bolette Blaagaard, *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016) with Gianmaria Colpani and *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018) with Adriano José Habel.

**Caterina Romeo** is an Associate Professor at Sapienza Università di Roma, where she teaches Literary Theory, Migration Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Gender Studies. She is the author of *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations in Italian Postcolonial Literature* (2022), *Riscrivere la nazione* (2018), and *Narrative tra due sponde. Memoir di italiane d'America* (2005). She has co-edited a special issue on Intersectional Italy (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2022), a special issue on Postcolonial Europe (*Postcolonial Studies*, 2015), and the volume *Postcolonial Italy* (2012). She has translated into Italian the work of numerous Italian American women writers and published essays on the memoir and autobiography, Italian postcolonial literature,

intersectionality, representations of Italian Blackness, and Italian American literature and culture in national and international journals and edited volumes. She is currently working on two different book projects, one on Domenico Dara (forthcoming in 2023) and the other on Italy's recent emigrations.

**Rosaria Ruffini** is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and at Ibn Zohr University of Agadir in Morocco. She received her PhD in Theatre Studies from Sorbonne Nouvelle University of Paris, with a thesis intitled "Les Afriques de Peter Brook". She has taught Theatre and Performance Studies in various European institutions, including Sorbonne Nouvelle University of Paris, Mines Paris PSL, Paris 8 University Vincennes-Saint-Denis, University of Franche Comté in Besançon, IUAV University of Venice and Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She currently directs the interdisciplinary research project "Playing at the Gateways of Europe: theatrical languages and performative practices in Migrant Reception Centres of the Mediterranean Area", in the scientific area of Performance Studies and Migration Studies, funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

**Margaret Tali** is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of Art History and Visual Culture in the Estonian Academy of Arts. Her research deals with practices of curating difficult histories, global histories of museums and collections, migration and nationalism, and Baltic history of the 19th and 20th centuries. Tali is the author of the monograph *Absence and Difficult Knowledge in Contemporary Art Museums* (Routledge, 2018) and co-editor, with Ieva Astahovska, of the special issue *Return of Suppressed Memories in Eastern Europe: Locality and Unsilencing Difficult Histories in Memory Studies* (June 2022). As a curator she has initiated the collaborative research, exchange and exhibition project *Communicating Difficult Pasts* (2019-22), in the framework of which she co-organised the exhibition *Difficult Pasts. Connected Worlds* in the Latvian National Museum of Art and the Lithuanian National Gallery of Art.

**Annarita Taronna** (PhD in Translation Studies) is an Associate Professor in English and Translation in the Department of Education, Psychology and Communication at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy. Her main research areas include gender and/in translation studies, cultural and postcolonial studies, African-American and Chicana languages and literatures, English as a lingua franca and the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). On these topics she has published a number of articles, including "Translation, Hospitality and Conflict: Language Mediators as an Activist Community of Practice Across the Mediterranean" (2016); *Black English and the New Cosmopolitanism: Karima 2G's Linguistic Creativity as a Transethnic Performative Practice* (2018); *English as a Lingua Franca, The Decolonial Option in Migratory Contexts* (2019 with Laura Centonze).

**Ruxandra Trandafoiu** is Reader in Communication at Edge Hill University (UK). She researches the role of social media in the political engagement and activism of Eastern European diasporas, the political effect of Brexit on EU nationals in the UK, the impact of music and music policy on the identity of place in Eastern Europe and trans-media practices seen as practices of migration. Ruxandra is the author of *Diaspora Online: Identity Politics and Romanian Migrants* (Berghahn) and co-editor of *Media and Cosmopolitanism* (Peter Lang) and *The Globalization of Musics in Transit: Musical Migration and Tourism* (Routledge). Her new books are *The Politics of Migration and Diaspora in Eastern Europe: Media, Public Discourse and Policy and Border Crossings and Mobilities on Screen*, both published by Routledge in 2022.

**Tom Western** is a Lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at UCL. His teaching and research centre on movements and migrations, cities and citizenships, relations and imaginations, activisms and anticolonialisms – usually working with methods that foreground sound and voice. He works primarily in Athens, Greece, where he is a member of the Syrian and Greek Youth Forum. Together they run the Active Citizens Sound Archive – a space for amplifying youth activism, community mobilising, and collective research and knowledge production. Tom is writing his first book, titled *Circular Movements*, which looks to unmap geographies of migration and citizenship in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to develop methods of movement-writing that push against borders.

## Studi e ricerche

1. Lippiello, Tiziana; Orsini, Raffaella; Pitingaro, Serafino; Piva, Antonella (a cura di) (2014). *Linea diretta con l'Asia. Fare business a Oriente*.
2. Zanin, Filippo; Bagnoli, Carlo (2016). *Lo "strategizing" in contesti complessi*.
3. Arpioni, Maria Pia; Ceschin, Arianna; Tomazzoli, Gaia (a cura di) (2016). *Nomina sunt...? L'onomastica tra ermeneutica, storia della lingua e comparatistica*.
4. Gelichi, Sauro; Negrelli, Claudio (a cura di) (2017). *Adriatico altomedievale (VI-XI secolo). Scambi, porti, produzioni*.
5. Panozzo, Fabrizio (a cura di) (2017). *Memoria e storia del Distretto dello Sportsystem di Montebelluna*.
6. Massiani, Jérôme (2018). *I promessi soldi. L'impatto economico dei mega eventi in Italia: da Torino 2006 a Milano 2015*.
7. Fantuzzi, Fabio (a cura di) (2017). *Tales of Unfulfilled Times. Saggi critici in onore di Dario Calimani offerti dai suoi allievi*.
8. Bizzotto, Giampietro; Pezzato, Gianpaolo (2017). *Impavidi veneti. Imprese di coraggio e successo a Nord Est*.
9. Calzolaio, Francesco; Petrocchi, Erika; Valisano, Marco; Zubani, Alessia (a cura di) (2017). *In limine. Esplorazioni attorno all'idea di confine*.
10. Carraro, Carlo; Mazzai, Alessandra (a cura di) (2017). *Gli impatti dei cambiamenti climatici in Italia. Fotografie del presente per capire il futuro*.
11. Sperti, Luigi (a cura di) (2017). *Giornata dell'archeologia: scavi e ricerche del Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici*.
12. Brombal, Daniele (ed.) (2017). *Proceedings of the XV East Asia Net Research Workshop. Ca' Foscari University of Venice, May 14-15, 2015*.
13. Coonan, Carmel Mary; Bier, Ada; Ballarin, Elena (a cura di) (2018). *La didattica delle lingue nel nuovo millennio. Le sfide dell'internazionalizzazione*.
14. Bagnoli, Carlo; Bravin, Alessia; Massaro, Maurizio; Vignotto, Alessandra (2018). *Business Model 4.0. I modelli di business vincenti per le imprese italiane nella quarta rivoluzione industriale*.
15. Carpinato, Caterina (2018). *Teaching Modern Languages on Ancient Roots. Anche le pietre parlano*.
16. Newbold, David (ed.) (2018). *My Mobility. Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad*.

17. Newbold, David (ed.) (2019). *Destination Ca' Foscari. International Students on Mobility Recount their Experiences in Venice.*
18. Volpato, Francesca (2019). *Relative Clauses, Phi Features, and Memory Skills. Evidence from Populations with Normal Hearing and Hearing Impairment.*
19. Cinquegrani, Alessandro (a cura di) (2019). *Imprese letterarie.*
20. Krapova, Iliyana; Nistratova, Svetlana; Ruvoletto, Luisa (a cura di) (2019). *Studi di linguistica slava. Nuove prospettive e metodologie di ricerca.*
21. Busacca, Maurizio; Caputo, Alessandro (2020). *Valutazione, apprendimento e innovazione nelle azioni di welfare territoriale. Lo SROI-Explore per i Piani Giovani in Veneto.*
22. Bagnoli, Carlo; Mirisola, Beniamino; Tabaglio, Veronica (2020). *Alla ricerca dell'impresa totale. Uno sguardo comparativo su arti, psicoanalisi, management.*
23. Ricorda, Ricciarda; Zava, Alberto (a cura di) (2020). *La 'detection' della critica. Studi in onore di Ilaria Crotti.*
24. Corrà, Elisa; Vinci, Giacomo (a cura di) (2021). *Palinsesti programmati nell'Alto Adriatico? Decifrare, conservare, pianificare e comunicare il paesaggio.* Atti della giornata di Studi (Venezia, 18 aprile 2019).
25. Bassi, Shaul; Chillington Rutter, Carol (eds) (2021). *The Merchant "in" Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto.*
26. Carloni, Giovanna; Fotheringham, Christopher; Virga, Anita; Zuccala, Brian (eds) (2021). *Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education.*
27. Plevnik, Aljaž; Rye, Tom (eds) (2021). *Cross-Border Transport and Mobility in the EU. Issues and State of the Art.*
28. Bagnoli, Carlo; Masiero, Eleonora (2021). *L'impresa significante fra tradizione e innovazione.*
29. Nocera, Silvio; Pesenti, Raffaele; Rudan, Igor; Žuškin, Srđan (eds) (2022). *Priorities for the Sustainability of Maritime and Coastal Passenger Transport in Europe.*





*Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe* proposes studies of postcolonial activism and citizen media as a critical framework to understand the refugee and migrant situations in the postcolonial publics of contemporary Europe. The volume argues that citizen media go hand in hand with postcolonial critique because of their shared focus on the deconstruction and decolonisation of Western logics and narratives. The sixteen studies presented in the book investigate the different and creative ways in which previously excluded social groups – refugees, migrants, and citizens – regain public voice and enable postcolonial publics.



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