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Activist translation, alliances, and performativity

Translating Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* into Italian

Michela Baldo

Introduction

This chapter theorises a concept of activist translation, understood as a political and, often, oppositional act, capable of producing social transformation (Tymoczko 2007, 2010; Wolf 2012; Baker 2013). It takes inspiration from the recent translation into Italian, by Federico Zappino, of Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Butler 2015), which has been translated as *L'alleanza dei corpi* (*The Alliance of Bodies*) (Butler 2017). Butler's book deals with a specific form of activism, one centred on public demonstrations and protests.

In this chapter, I first give some background information on the translation of Butler's book, and its reception in Italy; subsequently, I discuss what it means to engender collective protest through activist translation. Firstly, by drawing on the idea of the performativity of bodies gathered in public demonstrations, I analyse the performative aspect of this translation; in particular, I look at how the public presentations of the book's translation mobilised Italian queer transfeminist¹ groups that are committed to fight against precarity, much like the groups discussed by Butler, and what kind of impact the debates raised around the translation have had on them. Secondly, I examine the extent to which we can theorise translation in activist scenarios as an 'alliance,' a term borrowed from the title of the translation of Butler's book, and which is widely used in Italian queer transfeminist circles. Understanding translation as an alliance bears similarities with Mona Baker's (2016b) and other translation studies scholars' (Tymoczko 2007; Wolf 2012; Castro and Ergun 2017b) theorisation of activist translation as the creation of networks of solidarity across languages and cultures. Concepts like 'alliance' and 'solidarity,' as they are used by Butler, have occasionally been criticised both by the translator of *L'alleanza dei corpi* (Butler 2017) and by the Italian transfeminist groups and individuals who attended the presentations of the book's translation. This chapter will

thus move from the criticism generated by Butler's translation in relation to these terms to an exploration of the uses of such criticism for current understandings of activist translation.

The translation into Italian of Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*

In 2017, Federico Zappino translated Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) as *L'alleanza dei corpi* (*The Alliance of Bodies*). Zappino had previously translated other works by Judith Butler into Italian, including *La vita psichica del potere. Teorie del soggetto* (2013), the translation of *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), and *Fare e disfare il genere* (2014), a retranslation of *La disfatta del genere* (2006), which is the translation of *Undoing Gender* (2004). *L'alleanza dei corpi* was published by the Milanese independent publisher Nottetempo,² and the book was presented in various locations in Italy, including Rome, Bologna, and Milan. Zappino has also translated into Italian a book by the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick 2011), and a book by lesbian radical feminist Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind* (Wittig 2019).

In *L'alleanza dei corpi*, Butler uses the theory of gender performativity, which she had developed in her previous works, as the point of departure for a discussion of precarity and public protests. She analyses what public assemblies signify under current economic and political conditions, critically discussing movements of dissent such as those of Tahrir Square, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and others. Butler understands demonstrations as public forms of performative action, as 'embodied forms of expression, ways of making political demands even when speech is absent' (Berbec 2017). Performativity thus refers to the expressive dimension of physical bodies when gathering together, a dimension that does not rely on speech. This gathering also generates a new understanding of the public sphere of appearance essential to political life. Moreover, the public mobilisation of bodies makes visible the ontological precariousness and material precarity of people who gather publicly. While precariousness refers to the condition by which 'one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other' (Butler 2009b: 14), and to the fact that all lives 'can be expunged at will or by accident' (Butler 2009b: 25), precarity designates the material aspect of such precariousness. Butler defines precarity as a 'politically induced condition of maximised vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence' (Butler 2015: 33). Indeed, the aim of public demonstrations is to protest against the political and economic forces that are implicated in the creation of such material precarity. The latter also implies that people are interdependent, resistant, and grievable, that is that their life matters. Butler thus conceives the assembly of bodies as a performative enactment of precarity, which in turn becomes a site for the assembly and, eventually, for an alliance of bodies.

As Federico Zappino stated in two interviews (Baldo and Zappino 2018; Zappino 2017c), the decision to translate the word 'assembly' with 'alleanza [alliance],' rather than with its literal translation into Italian, namely 'assemblamento,' is justified by the importance the translator himself, and current queer transfeminist groups in Italy, place on the notion of alliance, a term which seems to be used more and more among these groups. The term alliance, which I will discuss further in this chapter, is understood as

a way to strengthen queer feminist struggles by bringing together other groups involved in similar struggles. Alliance was indeed used by Butler in the second chapter of the book, which is based on a paper presented in Venice in 2011, in the aftermath of the protests related to the Occupy Wall Street movement. Assembly, instead, for Butler (2015) refers to the public gatherings of people who get together in public spaces to protest. Following from this, Zappino (Baldo and Zappino 2018) argues that the assembly has to be understood as a moment preceding the alliance, as a moment when bodies, which are not yet political subjectivities, assemble. Translating ‘assembly’ with the term ‘alleanza’ [alliance] can thus be perceived as an indication of the intention to focus on the potential outcome of the assembly of bodies, that is, the potential formation of alliances among different subjectivities.

The importance of the term ‘alliance’ also becomes evident from the many reviews of the translation, which have appeared between 2017 and 2018, given also the popularity of Judith Butler and the fact that Zappino was already well known for his previous translations and public discussions of Butler’s work. One of these reviews (Presentazione Alleanza dei corpi 2017) aimed at promoting the presentation of the translation in Bologna, in April 2017, in an activist space called Mediateca Gateway,³ by representatives of the transfeminist collective Smaschieramenti and of the collective Connessioni precarie,⁴ which both work on the notion of precarity. The insightful interventions by a series of activists, other than that of Zappino, at this presentation stressed the possibilities offered by Butler’s work to think about alliances against neoliberal governance; with its hierarchies and exclusions, and the competitive ethos that maximises the precarity of our lives and separates our bodies, neoliberalism silences our senses and our desires to reach out to other bodies. Such desires can constitute the premise for an alliance that can oppose this neoliberal, forced isolation and fragmentation, and produce social transformation. This view was particularly expressed by activist Renato Busarello from Smaschieramenti, who stated that Butler’s *L'alleanza dei corpi* does what queer movements are currently trying to do in Italy, that is, trying to form alliances between LGBTQ+ groups and other groups based on the notion of a shared precarity. Busarello stressed the fact that, in a current political situation where LGBTQ+ rights are weaponised against other rights (see, for example, the pinkwashing rhetoric used by Israel against Palestinians),⁵ it is impossible to engage in activism without thinking of expanding one’s alliances.

The notion of precarity in its relation to the questions of capitalism, neoliberalism, and austerity politics is indeed a central topic of discussion within Italian queer transfeminist collectives. Transfeminist collectives such as Laboratorio Smaschieramenti (2008), mentioned above, Cagne sciolte (2013),⁶ a transfeminist collective from Rome working mainly on violence against women and LGBTQ+ subjects, Consultoria Transfemminista Queer Bologna (2013),⁷ working on notions of health, and especially SomMovimento NazioAnale (2012),⁸ a national network of transfeminist movements (around which I gravitate), which include Laboratorio Smaschieramenti and many other collectives and individuals, have made clear that the exclusion of transgender subjects from feminism is now over, and seek ways to combat precarity through the creations of networks of mutual support.

Other reviews of *L'alleanza dei corpi* placed emphasis on the new idea of ‘the people’ that the book foregrounds; this idea consists of an alliance among different groups against a political system that ignores the needs of the population,⁹ and which can oppose the fragmentation and inequalities produced by the neoliberal

system. Some of these reviews (Barberis 2017) also emphasised the fact that the term ‘queer’ in Italy,¹⁰ which is borrowed from English and is now used by various Italian queer collectives, refers not to an identity but to an alliance, as stated by Butler, and that the alliance is not only among different groups, but also among parts of ourselves; as Dominijanni (2017) observed, everybody, every identity, is an assembly of various elements.

Still other reviews (such as Terranova 2017) highlight, instead, the question of the occupation of public space as a form of resistance against neoliberalism, by way of making visible—through this embodied performance—the precarity of the people gathering in public assembly¹¹; at the same time, they show that precarity and vulnerability can be transformed into activist tools (I corpi alleati 2017). Some of these reviews are also interested in the question of livability—that is, how to find ways to live a better life by connecting to others—or they focus on the dialogue between Butler’s text and feminism. They show, for example, that feminism is the catalyst for a vast array of alliances (Guacci 2017) or that Butler’s text resonates strongly with the Italian women’s movement. Arts events and projects taking inspiration from the book have also been organised. These include ‘L’alleanza dei corpi,’¹² an art installation that borrowed the title of the translation of Butler’s book; it was hosted by the M-Gallery (a collaboration between Sardegna Teatro and EXMA Exhibiting and Moving Arts), in 2017, and contained performances, videos, talks, and a library space reflecting on how the creation of joint actions, and of alliances of bodies, can promote resistance against neoliberal capitalism.

The reviews of Zappino’s translation, the presentations and the artistic projects and events based on it, all insisted on the importance and relevance of the concept of alliance. However, in some interviews (Zappino 2017b, 2017c; Baldo and Zappino 2018)¹³ as well as during the presentations of the translation,¹⁴ as one review indicates,¹⁵ Zappino stated that Butler’s text is prone to criticism because it does not give readers sufficient tools to conceptualise the feasibility of such an alliance. For Zappino, the problematic aspect of Butler’s thesis is the fact that Butler—although laying the basis for a performative theory of democracy or, rather, a theory of the crisis of democracy—does not consider the price that an alliance among diverse groups might entail, and what conditions would support the building of such an alliance. This was also an issue raised by both the public and the discussants who attended presentations of Zappino’s translation,¹⁶ and who contended that Butler outlines a method without proposing solutions.

Zappino (2017b) states that an effective alliance among different groups affected by precarity is objectively difficult to achieve; for example, groups fighting against economic precarity caused by unemployment might not think that their battle shares a common ground with those fighting against the precarity caused by their racialisation, disability, or discrimination based on their sexuality and/or gender identities. Thus, despite the fact that often a wider alliance among different groups opposing precarity is possible, this might be halted because power differentials establish hierarchies among different types of oppression, for example in terms of which oppression is more worth fighting than others. For Zappino (Zappino 2017b; Baldo and Zappino 2018), these power differentials are represented by the concepts of masculinity, whiteness, class, and ableism, which should be the first targets of our contention. Zappino (2017b) thus defines Butler’s book as a populist one since it aims at glorifying the concept of ‘the people’ in the name of a radical democracy

based on radical equality. However, since this radical equality still does not exist, the term ‘populist’ in this sense acquires the meaning of demagogic: Butler focuses on the notion of creating popular consensus among different groups, rather than on the inequalities that challenge this unitary idea of people. Such an idea of consensus and democracy, Zappino continues, might be problematic if we do not oppose the hierarchies mentioned above, and, more specifically, if we do not engage in a fight against heteronormativity. Zappino (2017a) affirms that, before embarking on the task of recomposing differences and making alliances, we need to break the power differentials that compose such differences, and thus paradoxically to embark on a sort of queer separatism. He articulates this idea more in depth in his recent book, *Comunismo queer (Queer Communism)* (Zappino 2019). In the book he identifies heterosexuality, understood as the heteropatriarchal system in which we live, at the heart of the oppression of women, gay, lesbians, and trans and intersex people and sees this as a way of production of *our* (as LGBTQ+ people, including myself as a lesbian woman) inequalities. Heterosexuality as a ‘mode of production,’ for Zappino (2019: 50), precedes capitalism and thus alliances among LGBTQ+ groups and anticapitalist groups which do not aim at overturning heterosexuality risk maintaining the same oppression and precarity they claim to fight against.

Given these premises, it is clear that Zappino’s translation has contributed to the circulation of discourses, which—while praising Butler’s theories in general—are more concerned with the potentialities of establishing alliances based on the assembly of bodies in the public space than with the analysis of the assemblies of bodies themselves. These discourses thus move the focus slightly away from the utopian side of Butler’s text and towards the more practical potentialities, but also to the potential problematic aspects of her theorisations. We can therefore say that the Italian translation of Butler’s text moves the text forward as it is interested in exploring what could happen after bodies assemble, and how these assemblages might give rise to more established alliances. This view, which was especially voiced at the presentations of *L'alleanza dei corpi*, tells us also something about the importance of these presentations for the reception of LGBTQ+ work in Italy. In a country where LGBTQ+ studies are generally not taught at university, LGBTQ+ or other leftist activist spaces become the venues where, through such, usually numerous, presentations, queer theory is produced by activists, for activists, and for the wider public. Thus the presentations of the translations are important moments for activism.

As we have seen above, the discussion of Butler’s *L'alleanza dei corpi* at a presentation in Bologna (and this is valid for other presentations in the same city or other cities) has tapped into the questions that have preoccupied the queer feminist collective Smaschieramenti for a while, that is, the notion of alliances, and how to make them. The presentations of translations are thus performative, as they are productive moments for activism, as the next sections will illustrate better. Moreover, like other activist gatherings, they are highly charged affective moments. In relation to this, if the presentations of the previous translation of Butler’s *Undoing Gender* by Zappino (Butler 2014) had catalysed a widespread optimism, the presentation of *L'alleanza dei corpi* has instead reflected more the anxieties related to the feasibility of such an alliance, as anticipated above (Zappino 2019, personal communication, 14 August).

Activist translation and performativity

The presentations of Butler's translation touched on two important concepts: performativity and precarity. I believe that these concepts can be employed to discuss the meaning and importance of activist translation, and queer feminist translation specifically. If we look at the scenario presented above, in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler links the notion of performativity with that of precarity. In her view (Butler 2009a), gender performativity refers to the fact that gender is a certain type of enactment, or action, as it is prompted by obligatory norms that dictate what gender should or should not be; it involves the reproduction through repetition of gender norms, a repetition that always risks undoing such norms in unexpected ways. Precarity, on the other hand, refers to the condition in which certain populations suffer because of the lack of social and economic support, and consequently 'become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009a: ii). Precarity is linked to gender norms because those who do not abide by such norms are at risk of harassment and violence, and therefore in a precarious condition. Gender norms have to do with visibility, with recognition and thus with those who can be read, or understood, as a living being worth of living. Not abiding by gender norms, indeed, impacts on such recognition.

How can we, then, theorise activist translation with reference to Butler's notions of precarity and performativity? As I have argued elsewhere (Baldo 2017a; Baldo and Inghilleri 2018), translation in queer feminist spaces can be better understood when analysed through the lens of performativity.

The word 'performativity' has become increasingly visible in recent debates within the fields of theatre translation, and translation and performance studies, leading scholars to refer to a 'performative turn' in translation studies (Bigliuzzi, Kofler and Ambrosi 2013). As a concept, performativity has been used by Keith Harvey in relation to gender performativity in a gay context (2000) and, more specifically, to camp talk, and its translation between English and French. However, performativity has a much broader spectrum that exceeds the field of theatre and performance studies. Douglas Robinson (2003), a translation scholar who has discussed the notion of performativity at length, considers translation to be performative, because it does something to its audience; it produces an effect on the receivers of the translation. His theory of translation performativity derives from Austin's (1962) speech act theory, which suggests that performative utterances, as opposed to constative ones, perform actions rather than simply conveying information. Speech act theory also informs Butler's theory of gender performativity, which Sandra Bermann draws on in her discussion of the potential links between Butler's theory and the notion of translation. By referring to Derrida's (1977, 1985) theory of iterability, according to which translation entails repetition leading to meaningful transformations, Bermann (2014) suggests that it is this citational aspect of translation—similarly to the citational aspect of gender—that allows translations to produce change by exaggerating, displacing, and queering normative expectations across gender, culture, and language.

Hence, we can affirm that translation is performative because it involves a series of transformative acts. Michaela Wolf (2017), drawing on anthropologist Victor Turner, links the performative turn to the social turn in translation studies, and stresses the fact that the political and social dimension of translation becomes apparent through performative practices. By drawing on the meanings of the verb 'perform' (which stands

for ‘to do,’ ‘to finish,’ ‘to build,’ ‘to make’), she conceives of performativity as a process. Translation, for Wolf (2017), is performative because it constitutes meaning by exploring differences during the process itself, thus following in the footsteps of Turner’s conceptualisation of the processual and conflictual way in which culture is produced. The progression of performative actions is therefore subject to institutional and social conditions, and is a process characterised by a transformative force. This performativity of translation is also explored by Butler (2009a: x) herself, who affirms that the practice of translation is ‘a way of producing—performatively—another kind of we,’ so as ‘to negotiate the right to speak,’ to expose and resist the violence of power, and ‘to find the language to which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled.’

To summarise, performativity has to do with the productivity of translation. This productivity means that translation can produce political transformation. If we refer to the activist translation scenario illustrated in the previous section, we could say that the Italian translation of Butler’s *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* is performative because it plays a role within Italian queer feminist activism, by contributing to the elaboration and creation of new discourses about what it means to protest and to create alliances. As argued by Tymoczko (2010: 231), mobilised translators, using a series of textual and paratextual strategies, ‘often become founders of discursivity,’ that is, they are not merely importing new discourses in a target culture but initiating new discourses. Translation involves the transformation of the source text, which often takes unexpected paths and, consequently, becomes a very different cultural product in the target culture. Beyond that, it has to do with the transformation of the target activist community as well. The presentations of Butler’s translated books in transfeminist spaces—as in the case of other translations by Butler, and translations of other queer feminist theorists or activists (Baldo 2017a; Baldo and Inghilleri 2018)—play an important role within the activist landscape, since translations are presented, read, discussed, and contested in groups; they thus become a source of inspiration for art work, as I explained in the previous section of this chapter, when I mentioned the art installation based on *L'alleanza dei corpi* and hosted by the M-gallery, and for activism, for example through the use of slogans at demonstrations or as conceptual inspiration. The term *alleanza dei corpi*, or simply *alleanza*, for instance, was used to define a series of initiatives by SomMovimento NazioAnale and Smaschieramenti in the years 2017 and 2018, which will be discussed more in depth further in this chapter. The term stressed the importance of forming alliances among transfeminist and other groups. A previous translation by Zappino, of Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (Butler 2014), has become a source of inspiration for an edited book on the notion of gender and neoliberalism, which Zappino edited and published in 2016 (Zappino 2016), and which includes essays by many of the activists who took part in the book presentation. And again *L'alleanza dei corpi*, according to Zappino (2019, personal communication, 14 August), became a source of inspiration for his book *Comunismo Queer* (Zappino 2019). Moreover, these translation presentations bring together people who are interested in the same themes and gravitate around the same activist spaces, contributing to initiate at times new book projects. This is discussed in this volume, for example, by Düzkan, who puts emphasis on the powerful aspect of working together on translation projects within feminist collectives. Performativity therefore has to do with this traffic of bodies, discourses, and translations. Since performativity, as affirmed by Butler (2015), refers to the concept of ‘expressivity,’ we can think of these bodies gathered

together as a way in which translation speaks not only through words, but also through non-verbal means. Since, as Butler affirms, the gathering of bodies in public places is performative because it makes visible the precarity of those bodies, the gathering of people produced through, and in the aftermath of, the presentation of these translations likewise makes visible the precarity of translation.

Queer feminist activist translation is a precarious and vulnerable activity and for various reasons: it is most often performed voluntarily, and thus it is unpaid work; it is published at times by small publishing houses¹⁷ or often just online in activist blogs and websites, as it is considered too niche or too radical; finally it is often not granted the same recognition that other translations enjoy, especially because it is mostly collective work, and therefore does not bear the signature of an author. Although this is not the case for the translation of Butler's work analysed here, where the author is named, and for other translations of her work, because of the cultural capital Butler enjoys, it is certainly the case for many other translations. The reason behind all this is that translation, in most contexts, is a 'taken for granted' and 'un-problematised activity,' considered as a 'feminine' activity and given less importance than authorship (Chamberlain 1988). This is even more the case for queer feminist translation; thinking of queer feminist activist translation in performative terms, in the footsteps of Butler, may then help recognise and value its existence, consider it as an event worth of attention and discussion, and reveal the potential of this activity to queer assumptions and transform (hetero)normative, consolidated perceptions.

Similarly to the bodies gathered in public demonstrations, which become a tool to demand rights in order to fight precarity, shedding a light on activist translation, on the gathering of bodies at the presentations and discussions of translated books, may hold the potential to subvert the status quo, the precarity experienced by translation in general and activist translation more specifically. How? Activist translation performed in transfeminist spaces is most often guided by the urgency to speak, to make visible the precarity caused by not abiding by gender and sexuality heteronorms. This urgency of gathering together offers the possibility to create and/or consolidate networks of affective support that, through translation, participate in the making of a different space, one which has the potential to counteract that same precarity that brought the bodies together in the first instance. In this sense, activist translation is performative and transformative. Moreover, it can be considered performative as the translation and discussion of *L'alleanza dei corpi* have certainly boosted the interest in the concept of alliance and have possibly stressed even more among transfeminist circles the importance of forming new networks and alliances among groups whose precarity stems from the same heteropatriarchal roots, as the next section discusses in greater depth.

Activist translation, solidarity, and alliances

Along with the concept of performativity, the translation of Butler's work into Italian under the title *L'alleanza dei corpi*, as stated earlier on, puts emphasis on the concept of alliance. In this last section I discuss activist translation through the lens of this concept, and theorise activist translation—and queer feminist translation more specifically—as a kind of alliance. The concept of alliance can be discussed in conjunction with another concept, to which it is often linked in studies on activist translation: solidarity. A good starting point is the work of translation scholar Mona Baker, who, in her latest edited

volume (2016a), analysed translation within the political economy of protest movements, using the Egyptian revolution as a case study. Baker focuses on themes (such as protests and demonstrations) and scenarios (including Tahrir Square in Egypt) similar to those analysed by Butler (2015). According to Baker (2016b: 1), translation must be conceptualised as ‘an integral element of the revolutionary project’ and as a force participating in the creation and consolidation of networks of solidarity. Translation is what enables protest movements to connect and share experiences across the globe, thus allowing the activists to position themselves within a broader struggle. The values that inform contemporary movements, as Baker (2016b) states with reference to some of the authors of her edited collection as well as other scholars, such as Maeckelbergh (2011), differ from those that oriented traditional politics. These include a commitment to ‘horizontal, non-hierarchical forms of interaction,’ the ‘rejection of representational practices,’ ‘an embrace of diversity and pluralism’ (Baker 2016b: 10), and the promotion of solidarity between activists all over the world, as well as between activists who do not translate and activists who do.

Baker’s idea of activist translation therefore emphasises the notion of solidarity. She uses the concept not only in this latest publication (2016a), but also in previous work (Baker 2013), when commenting on various activist networks of translators such as *Babel*, *Ecos*, and *Tlaxcala*, and the importance placed by these on issues such as altruistic action and collective authorship. Baker’s work inserts itself within the so-called ‘sociological turn’ in translation studies (Angelelli 2014), and more specifically within the ‘activist turn,’ to borrow a term introduced by Michaela Wolf (2012). Angelelli (2014: 1) defines the ‘sociological turn’ as the increasing interest paid by the discipline ‘to the agency of translators and interpreters, as well as social factors permeating the communicative and social act of translation and interpreting.’ The ‘activist turn,’ by contrast, is explained by Wolf (2012) as the increased focus, in recent studies of translation, on the political factors that have contributed to mold the ‘habitus’ (a term taken from Bourdieu) of translators in contexts of activism. Talking about the activist agenda of translation means for Wolf (2012: 140) emphasising ‘specific situations where the translator’s intervention is shaped by a specific pattern of beliefs or convictions which follow a certain specific program mostly connected with solidarity and social claim.’ The concept of solidarity is also used by scholar Tymoczko (2007), in relation to her discussion of the concept of engagement. The term ‘engagement’ comes from the old French and refers to concepts such as commitment, involvement, participation, the assumption of obligations, entering into conflict, and so on. Tymoczko (2007, 2010) favours the term ‘engagement’ to that of ‘resistance,’ which—along with ‘engagement’—has been widely used in the conceptualisation of activism, and which was popularised by translation scholar Lawrence Venuti (1995, 1998, 2010). According to Tymoczko (2007, 2010), Venuti borrowed the term from the activist movements opposing occupying forces and fascist governments during World War II, and used it in his theorisation of the concepts of foreignisation; he stated that foreignisation is the disruption of the linguistic expectations of the target language, including the expectation of fluency, which mark translation as foreign. Foreignisation is thus a translation strategy that aims at resisting the aggression and violence of monolingual Anglo-American culture, with its ethnocentric tendency to reduce and domesticate the foreign text to Anglo-American, imperialist target language values.

Tymoczko criticises the concept of *resistance* as theorised by Venuti. She argues that it implies that an antagonist and opponent are known and well defined, whereas various

descriptive studies of translation seem to show, instead, that there is no agreement among translation scholars on what should be resisted in translation. In addition, resistance, in Venuti's terms, refers to the opposition against the 'cultural enclosure and cultural dominance of readers in the United States' (Tymoczko 2007: 211), and might not be an argument suited for subaltern cultures already flooded with foreign linguistic impositions. Moreover, since resistance implies being reactive rather than proactive, as it refers to an act of opposition to a force or power, it 'is restrictive with respect to initiative, limiting the translations to a more passive role' (2007: 210). The notion of 'engagement' does not exclude that activist translation might be engaged in resistance against a specific power but allows the term to include much more, especially because it is not possible to oppose everything about a specific source culture and translators have to negotiate their way around by making choices on what to prioritise (Tymoczko 2010). The term 'engagement,' instead, suggests that activist translations have a proactive dimension, because they initiate ethical, political, and ideological actions based on a commitment to specific principles as well as actions involving solidarity. Indeed, engagement means 'acting together with,' and engaged translators usually join with others in collective action (Tymoczko 2007), thus forming alliances. In addition to including the concept of solidarity and alliance, the term 'engagement' also brings forward the performative aspect of activist translation and, more specifically, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspect of translation. Activist translation is 'translation that rouses, inspires, witnesses, mobilizes, incites to rebellion,' and that aims at participating in social movements and at 'achieving demonstrable social and political change' (Tymoczko 2000: 26).

Similarly to Tymoczko (2007, 2010), Baker (2007) criticises Venuti's notion of resistance, arguing that the dichotomy between foreignising and domesticating is not suitable for an explanation of the wide variety of choices and negotiations that activist translators make, in relation to the texts and authors they translate, and the communities in which they act. Commenting on the paper of an author included in her edited volume on the Egyptian revolution, Baker (2016b: 4–5) stresses that the aim of the struggle against neoliberal policies is not only 'to counter hegemonic narratives promoted by powerful institutions, but also to allow activists to build networks of solidarity across linguistic and national boundaries.' Solidarity, in its links to the notion of engagement and alliance, is thus an important concept for both Tymoczko (2007) and Baker (2016b), whereas it does not belong to Venuti's theorisations (1995, 1998).

The 'Solidarity as translation' project of the University of Vienna¹⁸ takes into account three forms of solidarity, namely national, Christian, and socialist. Solidarity for the purposes of this chapter has to be understood as a socialist solidarity. It is a solidarity derived from the social class struggle and understood as a common fight against capitalism. This socialist solidarity differs from solidarity understood in a Catholic sense, which refers instead to the idea of assistance for those in need (although certain characteristics, such as mutual obligation and love, might be present in the activist solidarity I am discussing here).

Although Tymoczko and Baker give emphasis to the notion of solidarity, and hardly mention the term alliance, preferring to that the term 'network of solidarity' for example (Baker 2016), alliance appears quite often instead, in relation to the concept of solidarity, in the work of feminist translation scholars. Both alliance and solidarity are mentioned extensively in Castro and Ergun's (2017b) edited book on transnational feminism and translation, another highly relevant work for the present discussion, which deals with

translation in queer transfeminist contexts in Italy. In the introduction to their edited collection, Castro and Ergun (2017a: 1) foreground the important role that translation plays ‘in the making of feminism transnational’; they envision transnational feminism as a polyphonic space and as ‘a model for cross-border dialogue, resistance, solidarity and activism.’ Translation thus enters the project of creating transnational solidarity and alliances, although translation, the authors specify, can also disable ‘crosscultural encounters, dialogues and alliances among feminists’ (Castro and Ergun 2017a: 8), as also confirmed by some of the papers featuring in their edited collection.

In the same edited collection, the contribution by Santaemilia (2017) focuses on the idea of building interdisciplinary alliances among feminist translation scholars, while that of Tissot (2017) refers to the idea of translation as an activity involved in the reconceptualisation of a universality that should not reproduce its ethnocentrism, and should instead pay attention to otherness. Tissot (2017) understands transnational solidarity as a call for imagining and building new alliances not rooted in the colonial claim of an essentialist ‘woman’ identity, or in a global sisterhood grounded in the illusion that women are the victims of the same patriarchal oppression around the world; rather, this solidarity should be based on the recognition of hierarchies and differences among women. These transnational solidarities should therefore incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives, voices, and narratives. Reimóndez (2017), another author included in the volume, on the other hand, stresses that the possibility of building transnational solidarity and alliances among feminists rests on the awareness, by feminist translators, that transnational feminist conversations are often held in hegemonic languages such as English (see Düzkan, in this volume), with the consequence that conversations in other languages are not granted such visibility or access. Similarly, Pas and Zaborowska (2017) discuss the difficulties of applying feminist concepts that are taken for granted in English to other non-hegemonic languages. In sum, for most of the feminist translation scholars contained in this book it is impossible to imagine the formation of alliances, understood as short- or long-term relationships, without an ongoing praxis of translation, and they seem to invoke solidarity as a premise for, or a characteristic of, such alliances.

Given these premises, solidarity and alliances—two terms used in translation studies scholarship, with reference to activist translation and feminist translation—need to be problematised, as the specific case of the translation into Italian of Butler’s work on performativity and precarity teaches us. If the act of translating might be considered an activist act, aimed at forming international alliances among activist groups and collectives that share the same political agenda, such an act cannot be considered smooth as it is often imbued with issues of power imbalance between languages and cultures; these may at times silence the privileges and the hierarchies existing between such languages and cultures, as studies of postcolonial translation, feminist translation, translation in the context of migration, and activist translation have shown over the course of the past three decades.

If we transpose this discourse to the specific case study analysed here, in the context of the reception of *L'alleanza dei corpi*, we can see that alliances are not only a dominant theme of discussion in transfeminist groups in Italy, but also a common activist praxis. The network of transfeminist queer groups called SomMovimento NazioAnale, mentioned in a previous section of this chapter in connection with the presentation of *L'alleanza dei corpi*, and around which Federico Zappino gravitates (although he is not an active member of it) has put forward the urgency of constructing alliances with groups of African and other migrants based in Italy, such as the

group Coordinamento Migranti Bologna,¹⁹ which includes migrants mainly coming from African countries. Indeed, SomMovimento NazioAnale supported the demonstration organised by migrants in Macerata and Florence, in the spring of 2018, and in Modena in July 2018,²⁰ against racism and fascism in Italian politics.²¹ On 14 July 2018, they also organised the international day of solidarity in the city of Ventimiglia (situated at the border between Italy and France), which supported the cause to grant migrants a European residency permit. Moreover, SomMovimento NazioAnale has created alliances with the sex workers movement called Ombre Rosse,²² in preparation for the national demonstration to denounce violence against women, held on 25 November 2017 in Rome, and also in preparation for the National Women's Strike of 8 March 2018. It thus supported Ombre Rosse in its fight for the decriminalisation of sex work, and for the recognition of sex work as work.

The word used by SomMovimento NazioAnale to define these invoked alliances with other collectives and groups was 'solidarity.' This choice of wording was based on the premises that a transfeminist politics is intersectional and focused on the struggle against precarity, sexism, racism, and fascism. The latter all have the same heteropatriarchal roots, based on the belief of the supremacy of the white, heterosexual, and cisgender male over all other non-male (i.e. female, transgender, or gender queer), non-heterosexual, and non-white and/or migrant subjectivities.

These alliances, invoked on the basis of a shared heteropatriarchal oppression, which is also linked to the notion of precarity as discussed by Butler, are encouraged not only by SomMovimento NazioAnale, but also by the now well-known feminist movement against male violence, Non Una di Meno,²³ which has taken inspiration from the Argentinian movement Ni Una Menos. Non Una di Meno was created in Italy in 2017, and is currently one of the largest feminist movements in Italy. Since its inception, it has organised various protests and gender strikes (for example on 8 March), it has written a national plan against violence on women, and it has formed links with the global movement as it developed in various other countries (Spain, other Latin America countries, Germany, Turkey, the UK). At present, Non Una di Meno is working to address the demands raised by women, migrants, and precarious workers against current Italian reactionary politics, which are patriarchal, neoliberalist, and racist.

Alliances, according to the above-mentioned Italian collective Connessioni precarie,²⁴ intensify and multiply struggles; they make movements stronger and better equipped to face the dominance of far-right nationalist groups in Italy and elsewhere, as heteropatriarchal oppression can no longer be addressed solely on a national scale, given the globalised world we live in and the globalised nature of exploitation and violence against women. If we link this to what we previously stated in relation to activist/feminist translation, translation can become a form of solidarity that might circumvent censorship in a specific national state, help increase the pressure on violent regimes, and confer longevity to the struggles (Baker 2016c), as it contributes to the building of international activist networks fighting the same struggle.

However, while this is certainly a positive goal, solidarity, as the criticism related to the translation of Butler's work (2015, 2017) has demonstrated, should be problematised if we want to give a more precise account of the complexities and hierarchies existing within activist groups themselves. In fact, these groups are not immune to the persistence of some of the forms of oppression that they are invested in fighting against, a fact the above-mentioned feminist movements are very much aware of. Zappino (2017b, 2018, 2019), the translator of *L'alleanza dei corpi*, for example, warns us about the fact that

the oppression of LGBTQ+ minorities—even when perceived as sharing certain characteristics with other groups that fight against economic precarity, for instance—might still constitute a condition for the privilege of these other groups. Consequently, not recognising this and the hierarchies existing between groups might hinder the formation of effective alliances. Examples are represented by two, relatively recent, episodes amply discussed among queer feminist groups (see also Zappino and Ardilli 2017) and known as ‘the rape of Parma’ and the ‘incidents at the Bari Pride.’²⁵ The former refers to the rape, in 2010, of a female activist by fellow male activists as part of the antifascist centre in Parma called RAF, and the efforts at covering up this case by the rapists and their activist friends by slut shaming the victim. The case shows the contradictions lying in a self-definition of antifascism that does not take into account sexism. The second case refers to an episode that happened during the LGBTQ+ pride in Bari in 2017. During the parade and during a party organised after it, a group of male antifascists, who had collaborated as allies in the organisation of the Pride, exercised homotransphobic and sexist violence by shoving, and verbally insulting and threatening women and LGBTQ+ subjectivities. These two episodes show how sexism and homotransphobia might be often still present within activist groups that are LGBTQ+ allies, and define themselves as anticapitalist, antifascist, and antisexist.

Moreover, the presence of sexism in activist movements, including LGBTQ+ groups, is a topic which has been amply discussed by the aforementioned feminist movement *Non Una di Meno*, which organised two workshops on the theme.²⁶ Moreover, Zappino, at one presentation of his translation of *L'alleanza dei corpi*,²⁷ and in his *Comunismo Queer* (Zappino 2019), stated that since LGBTQ+ minorities are often not united among themselves, they should invest energies in becoming better allies of each other. He also states that a populist invocation of an alliance with other movements, in order to seek consensus, might risk replicating the normalisation of these power relationships based on gender, race, class, and so on; this is often an operation favoured by capitalism (Zappino 2017b, 2019). However, Zappino (2019) continues, these power relations exploited by capitalism for its advantage are not caused by capitalism itself but by the heteropatriarchal regime preexisting it, as mentioned above. Thus, an alliance that overlooks this, and fights only to overturn capitalism and precarity, might be very ineffective.

Similarly to what was discussed above, Mortada (2016: 130) comments on the fact that the revolution of Tahrir Square brought to the fore the sexism existing within activist groups fighting against the regime of Mubarak, arguing that not only mainstream discourses but also some activist discourses ‘tend to impose a passive role on Arab and Muslim women, projecting them either as victims or submissive subjects.’

With this knowledge in mind, and with the awareness that conflicts continuously cross feminist movements themselves, we could say that creating effective networks of solidarity through translation is a complex matter; in addition to the fact that translation further exploits and misinterprets discourses in the passage from one language and culture to another, it risks obscuring the power hierarchies present within movements. This misinterpretation is, for example, at the centre of Scholz’s (2014) critique of transnational feminist solidarity, again with reference to the protests of Tahrir Square. She says that transnational feminist solidarity must find strategic and responsible ways to obtain more complete information about specific foreign feminist movements, in order to avoid focusing only on a few selected aspects of these, thus missing a chance to form a more accurate and nuanced vision of the facts.

As Selim (2016: 85) argues, in order to avoid ‘misconstruction and misunderstanding of complex histories and political economies of domination and struggle,’ we should aim for what she calls ‘deep translation,’ which she opposes to ‘crisis translation.’ Whereas ‘crisis translation’—a translation done in emergency mode, for example in situations of protest—might translate into a sort of touristic and superficial voyeurism, which forecloses the possibility for real solidarity, ‘deep translation moves beyond image and spectacle’ (Selim 2016: 84) in order to build more sustained, international solidarity networks. Using the terminology employed in relation to the Italian translation of Butler, we could compare ‘crisis translation’ to the assembly of bodies, and ‘deep translation’ to the notion of alliances. In order to build more sustainable alliances we need to engage in deep translation, which presupposes that we are situated in a specific location, committed to the place of struggle and that we engage in a long series of actions and negotiations that take time and effort.

In conclusion, if the discussion of the assembly of bodies by Butler points toward the urgency, the enthusiasm, and the thrilling energy that protest movements performatively generate, translating the ‘assembly’ into a wider and effective alliance is a far more complex operation: one that requires a more sustained effort and a constant awareness of the hierarchies of power in place.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the notions of performativity, solidarity, and alliances, taking inspiration from the translation into Italian of Butler’s *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Using the notions of performativity in connection to that of precarity, as theorised in Butler’s book, and drawing from the reception of the book’s translation within queer transfeminist groups in Italy, I have examined the implication and fruitfulness for activist translation of Butler’s concepts. I have linked the concept of performativity to activist translation, and for two reasons. Firstly, because translation participates in the act of producing and making new discourses visible; secondly, because it creates new activist networks and alliances among activists. I have also discussed the act of forming new alliances in relation to the notion of solidarity. Solidarity is a recurrent term in studies on activist translation, and this chapter has attempted to problematise this concept in view of the criticism raised by the translation of Butler’s book into Italian. If solidarity is certainly a productive term for studies on translation and activism, we also need to take into account the ways in which activist translation—understood as an act of solidarity—can obscure the complexities and power hierarchies existing in certain activist contexts, and between different translational contexts.

Related topics

Written on the Heart, in Broken English; Feminism in Translation; Resistant Recipes.

Notes

- 1 Transfeminist groups are feminist groups whose feminism is informed by transgender politics and queer theory and politics. Further explanation of the term is given in the next section of this chapter.

- 2 Nottetempo self-defines as an independent publisher, and is especially interested in making accessible to the wider public works of philosophy and politics, and in publishing new emerging Italian narrative authors.
- 3 Mediateca Gateway is a media library in Bologna which contains an archive of social activist movements since the 1960s, and that often hosts presentations of books related to LGBTQ+ activism. The video of the presentation of *l'alleanza dei corpi* on 24 April 2017 is available at: www.facebook.com/mediateca.gateway/videos/809971542512787/
- 4 Smaschieramenti is a queer feminist collective from Bologna created in 2008 initially as a space of reflection on masculinity. In recent years Smaschieramenti has concentrated its work on questions of gender and sexuality in their intersection with the concept of precarity. Connessioni Precarie is a collective formed of Italians and migrants that centres its activism on the notion of economic precarity as a global characteristic of contemporary work. See <https://smaschieramenti.noblogs.org> and www.connessioniprecarie.org [accessed 20 March 2010].
- 5 Pinkwashing refers to a variety of marketing and political strategies aimed at promoting products, countries, people, and so on through an appeal to gay-friendliness, in order to be perceived as progressive, modern, and tolerant.
- 6 Cagne sciolte is a transfeminist group from Rome. It was formed in 2013 and has worked mainly on fighting against slut-shaming and violence against women and LGBTQ+ subjects. See <https://cagnesciolte.noblogs.org> [accessed 20 March 2010].
- 7 See <https://consultoriaqueerborgna.noblogs.org> [accessed 20 March 2010].
- 8 SomMovimento NazioAnale was formed in 2012 with the idea of uniting various transfeminist groups and individuals in Italy in order to strengthen the struggle against heteropatriarchy and neo-liberalism at national but also transnational level. See <https://sommovimentonazioanale.noblogs.org> [accessed 20 March 2010].
- 9 www.reset.it/libri/alleanza-dei-corpi-butler [accessed 8 October 2019]; see also <https://queerographics.com/2017/02/13/lalleanza-dei-corpi/> [accessed 8 October 2019] and *Cultweek*.
- 10 On the various uses of the meaning of queer in Italian, see Baldo (2017b). Queer in Italy can be used as an umbrella term to refer to LGBT people, or in a de-politicised way as a fashionable foreign term used in commercial contexts, or as a highly political term when used by some queer feminist groups, which claims the derogatory aspect of the term used by US and UK activists.
- 11 In the website of *Cooltura* the phrase used is 'manifestare per manifestarsi,' a word play that means 'to demonstrate to make oneself visible.' www.lacooltura.com/2017/05/judith-butler-corpo-focolaio-resistenza/ [accessed 21 March 2019].
- 12 See www.sardeginateatro.it/content/lalleanza-dei-corpi [accessed 22 March 2019].
- 13 Along with the interview released for RSI (Swiss radio television) in February 2017 (Zappino 2017c) and the Skype interview with the author of this chapter (Baldo and Zappino 2018), Zappino was interviewed by the magazine *Che fare* in May 2017 (Zappino 2017b).
- 14 See the presentation of the translation by Nottetempo edizioni in January 2017 in Milan, and at the LGBT space Cassero in Bologna on 21 April 2017.
- 15 See the review of Zappino's translation within the magazine *I diavoli*. www.idiavoli.com/recensioni/corpi-alleanza-judith-butler-politica/ [accessed 22 March 2019].
- 16 This question was raised by lecturer Marzia Vaccari at the presentation of the translation at LGBT centre Cassero on 21 April 2017, by Cristina Morini at the presentation of Zappino's translation in Milan in January 2017, and by Angela Balzano and Paola Rudan at the presentation of Zappino's translation on 24 April 2017 at Mediateca Gateway in Bologna.
- 17 Although the publisher of *L'Alleanza dei Corpi*, Nottetempo, is a prestigious (and not small) publisher, LGBTQ+ works in Italy are also published by small publishing houses interested in LGBTQ+ themes. The situation is indeed very complex as publishers like Meltemi, which is a well known publisher, have published the translation of most of the work by Butler and other postcolonial, feminist and radical thinkers (Spivak, Hall, Gilroy), while other radical feminist work in Italian translation has been published by small publishers such as Golena (for what concerns Spanish transfeminism, see Baldo and Inghilleri 2018), or Ombre Corte for what concerns Monique Wittig for example (see Wittig 2019).
- 18 See www.eoaw.ac.at/en/ikt/research/translation/solidarity-as-translation/ [accessed 17 March 2019]
- 19 See <https://it-it.facebook.com/coordinamentomigranti.bologna.7> [accessed 12 August 2019].
- 20 See www.radionadurto.org/2018/07/04/modena-sabato-7-luglio-manifestazione-delle-e-dei-migranti-per-una-liberta-senza-paure/ [accessed 8 October 2019].

- 21 For an account of the intersection between racism, fascism and sexism in the current Italian politics, dominated by a coalition of right and conservative parties, see Giuliani (2018).
- 22 Ombre Rosse is a collective of sex workers born in Rome in 1992. See www.facebook.com/collettivoOmbreRosse/ [accessed 14 August 2019].
- 23 See the website of the movement at <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com> [accessed 20 March 2019].
- 24 See www.conneccioniprecarie.org/2019/03/18/the-connecting-breach-the-transnational-power-of-the-feminist-strike/ [accessed 20 March 2019].
- 25 In relation to the rape of Parma see also www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/12/17/stupro-in-centro-antifascista-di-parma-il-sessismo-resiste-anche-tra-i-movimenti-di-sinistra/3266048/. In relation to the incidents of at the Bari Pride see www.facebook.com/notes/transfemministe-queer-bari/scritti-cozzali-di-frocie-indecorose/1376453625805978/ [accessed 15 August 2019].
- 26 See the report of these workshop at the following page <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/tavolo-sessismo-nei-movimenti/> [accessed 8 October 2019].
- 27 See the podcast of the presentation by Federico Zappino of *L'alleanza dei corpi* at Cassero on 21 April 2017. www.cassero.it/alleanza-dei-corpi-judith-butler-podcast/ [accessed 20 March 2019].

Further reading

Baker, Mona (ed.) (2016) *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution*. New York and London: Routledge.

This edited collection focuses on the topic of activist translation in situations of protests, specifically with reference to the Egyptian revolution, which is also one of the scenarios mentioned in Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

Baer, Brian, and Klaus Kaindl (eds.) (2017) *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer. Theory, Practice, Activism*. New York and London: Routledge.

This edited book includes several chapters (Addison-Smith 2017; Baldo 2017a; Démont 2017; Nossem 2017), on the meaning of queer translation and on the notion of translation and activism in queer scenarios which provide a deeper understanding of the notion of queer translation discussed in this handbook chapter.

Wolf, Michaela (2012) 'The Sociology of Translation and Its 'Activist Turn'', *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 7 (2): 129–143.

This article specifically focuses on the activist turn in translation studies and thus covers some of the basic concepts underpinning this chapter.

Robinson, Douglas (2003) *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words*. London and New York: Routledge.

The book draws on the notion of performative linguistics by Austin, Searle, Derrida, and others and argues that translation is strictly linked to that notion, as it is an effective tool for reproducing words as doing something to their audience.

Butler, Judith (2009) 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,' *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4 (3): i–xiii.

This article by Butler well summarises the interconnections between the notion of gender performativity and precarity in relation to LGBTQ minorities.

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