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

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# Introduction to Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media

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#### 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. In this way, Denmark and the UK are planning to deter migrants from seeking asylum in the first place, shipping them out of

<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, You-Tube 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 arquably 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 activistic art or artivism (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 activisms 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 artivism, 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 multisited forms of citizen media activities. Increasingly part of intellectual movements, protests, and activisms 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 artivism 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 artivism, 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 artivism, 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 artivism 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 artivism becomes a critical lens or framework to understand the refugee situations in Europe or postcolonial expressions (Zebracki 2020).

# 4 Social Media Activism, Media Publics, Artivism & 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. Lilie 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 activisms 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", Nadica 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 artivism connected to the Palestinian question in their chapter "Decolonial Mediatic Artivist 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 Artivism' 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 Turkev 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 descendents 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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