

Exploring Transnational Dimensions of Activism in Contemporary Book Culture

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

**EXPLORING TRANSNATIONAL
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The board book *A is for Activist* is an ABC children’s title written and illustrated by Innosanto Nagara, an Indonesian social justice graphic designer living in the United States. The title started out as a self-published book crowdfunded on Kickstarter for his own child in 2012, was then picked up by independent publisher Seven Stories Press, and has since achieved bestselling sales status. While originally published in English, it has been translated and sold all over the world, including by Seven Stories’ Spanish-language imprint Siete Cuentos, in an edition with Martha Gonzalez’s translation and an audio version from guitarist and activist Tom Morello. This example highlights the transnational dynamics of power, identity, and language in a book’s activism in the world. It also is an example of what Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser call “commodity activism”: for better or worse, buying commodities—in this case, books—can be a form of participation in and identification with social movements.¹

Building on, but also expanding Rachel Schreiber’s concept of “print activism” in the long twentieth century,² this special issue highlights how

books-as-objects and books-as-commodities, as well as the institutions and people who produce and distribute them, can catalyze political and social change. In Schreiber’s parsing, “print activism” refers to “print media’s role in social and political activism”; Schreiber identifies print activism as the “central vehicle by which activists on all points of the political spectrum—left, right, and center—spread their opinions, elicited support, created networks among like-minded individuals, and attempted to establish cohesive group identities for the larger world.” Even as activism takes on new forms in the ever-changing mediascape, the key issue remains of circulating knowledge and information, though the “forms these knowledges travel through shift according to technological advances and individual access to these technologies.”³ Of course, as core book historical models have emphasized, books are written, published, distributed, and consumed in particular moments in time, shaped by social, political, and legal contexts.⁴ And as Bush and Krishnan remind us, “Print activism also depends on readers.”⁵

Additionally, researchers can become activists in their own right, not only researching *about* activism but using research itself *as* activism to catalyze political and social change. The scholar-activists whose work appears in this special issue ask the important questions about their role in the research process and how the research centres marginalized people and groups, and recommend imperatives for change.⁶ Ramasubramanian and Sousa identify scholar-activism as being “community-driven, social justice-oriented, action oriented, grounded in co-creation of knowledge, interdisciplinary, long term in nature, challenging of the status quo, driven by intrinsic motivators, and boundary-blurring.”⁷ The scholars represented in this special issue highlight patterns of oppression: structural racism, the white gaze, heteronormativity and homophobia, misogyny, and Anglocentrism. Their research also recognizes patterns and modes of resistance: self-publishing for Black French and German authors, menstrual activism to eliminate a tampon tax, elevating Black voices through publication in South Africa during apartheid, publishing and celebrating non-Anglophone Afrikaans language and culture through magazines, developing international feminist publishing networks to resist racism and colonialism, etc. Their research focuses on underrepresented groups and perspectives as a way to expand who is centred and which types of publications are valued in book studies.

For the three editors of this special issue, it was our own research interest in books as activism and contemporary transnational book culture that led us to this special issue. We acknowledge the limitations of our own subject positions and identities (as we are all white women), even though there is diversity in our backgrounds and approaches. We live and operate in three distinct book industries and national cultures—South Africa, Germany and the United States. Le Roux has researched language,⁸ race,⁹ bestsellerism,¹⁰ and political contexts¹¹ in South African book publishing. Noorda has investigated book reception in diasporic communities,¹² border-crossing books,¹³ and international book marketing.¹⁴ Norrick-Rühl has examined questions of translation and bibliodiversity,¹⁵ transnational forms of popular book culture and, recently, the diversifying potential of the digital literary sphere with a case study of Bernardine Evaristo’s author-activism.¹⁶

The 11 articles in this special issue on activism in contemporary book culture examine linguistic diversity through examples from France, Germany, South Africa, the UK, and the US. They highlight various aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality/language. The research represented in these articles employs a range of qualitative and quantitative methods: case studies, interviews, close reading, autoethnography, etc. These methods are particularly suited for “doing recent history,” as discussed, *inter alia*, by Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano.¹⁷

The articles are organized into three main themes: 1) progressive political and social movements, 2) publishing, activism and identity, and 3) transnationalism and bibliodiversity. These themes illustrate the personal nature of activism in book culture, tied so closely to an individual’s identity; the transnational network and power structures that endow some national literatures and languages with literary capital but not equally;¹⁸ and the entanglement of political and social movements with a book’s production and reception.

Research from Barth, Enszer, and Preston addresses the theme of book activism in progressive political and social movements. As Bayne has argued, “circulating knowledge outside of dominant structures offers psychically- and physically-threatened groups ways to collectivize and resist.”¹⁹ Barth and Enszer focus on movements related to feminism and sexuality. Barth’s article

“No Taxation for Menstruation” hones in on the example of *The Tampon Book*, a menstruation book in contemporary Germany that also emphasized how books were taxed at a lower rate than menstrual hygiene products in Germany. The book was published just after the transnational #metoo movement highlighted sexism across many institutions and industries (including publishing). Enszer addresses the ways that lesbian-feminist publishers in the US contributed to transnational feminism through the establishment of transnational feminist publishing networks toward the end of the twentieth century. Preston considers the role of artist book fairs in the circulation of ideas and meaning-making. Making books and, more broadly, printmaking can in itself be a form of activism—as was explored, for example, at the 2022 conference of the American Printing History Association with their theme “Making Artistic Noise: Printing and Social Activism from the 1960s to the Present.”²⁰ Also in 2022, members of the University of Maryland’s BookLab took to the streets to protest impending Supreme Court decisions on abortion rights, and printed flyers on-site. In an analogue-digital twist, images of the prints they made and of them as letterpress activists went viral and were picked up by mainstream (online) media such as the *New York Times* and *Reuters*.²¹

Activism and identity is a theme primarily focused on racial identity in this issue. Le Roux’s “Power to the People” highlights the Black-owned South African publisher Skotaville, which elevated Black voices and authors through publication during the 1980s and 1990s. Malanda’s research argues that self-published Black French and German children’s books are Blacktivism (Black activism), addressing non-traditional (self-published), non-Anglophone (German and French), and non-white (Black) books through interviews with self-published Black children’s authors. Saha and van Lente ask “What obstacles do authors of colour face?” and reveal the barriers through interviews with 110 publishers. Key to their argument is that ethnically minoritized audiences are undervalued and racialized assumptions about them driven in all aspects of the publishing process. The observation from Saha and van Lente that “diversity works on the terms of whiteness” is a theme that threads through all three of these articles addressing South Africa, France, Germany, and the US.

Transnationality and bibliodiversity are addressed in examinations of Afrikaans publishing, francophone publishing, and international participation at the Frankfurt Book Fair. With a historical lens, Klingenberg and Miller investigate Afrikaans activism through *Ons Klynjji*, an Afrikaans magazine established at the end of the nineteenth century, which promoted progressive causes such as Afrikaans language and literature movements and protest of apartheid. Afrikaans identity is transnational and this complex identity is reflected in *Ons Klynjji*.

Belén Riveiro and Szpilbarg’s research is firmly grounded in its own historical moment: they observed the participation of Argentinian small publishers at the 2020 virtual Frankfurt Book Fair and conducted surveys and interviews with small publishers to understand their activities and position within the global book industry. This article can be read in conversation with a recent special issue of *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* on book fairs and book events, edited by Claire Squires and Beth Driscoll.²²

Our special issue more generally can be juxtaposed with and read alongside another special issue of *Mémoires du Livre / Studies in Book Culture* which considers “Le livre et l’imprimé engagés,” co-edited by René Audet and Marie-Hélène Jeannotte in 2011.²³ Audet returns to the topic in these pages. With Corentin Lahouste, he dedicates his analysis to “francophone book activism,” considering different types of experimental and activist outputs across national boundaries.

With an eye on current trends in the mainstream global book industry, Tréhonart Nolwenn discusses the emergence of sensitivity readers in France. The (increasing) engagement of these actors in the literary field is an indicator of a changing book trade, and sensitivity reading is clearly a transnational phenomenon, highlighting shifting priorities in publishing across national boundaries. The challenges are apparent when different histories, priorities, and traditions come into the fold, as discussions around sensitivity reading in Germany have also highlighted.²⁴

As broad as its scope is, however, our special issue is not able to showcase print activism exhaustively. Certainly, issues of book institutions as activist spaces, such as in bookstores and libraries, could be explored further, building

on existing work by Kimberley Kinder, and Sherrin Frances.²⁵ The relationship of the book industry—itself a big polluter—with ecological activism is in dire need of critical scholarly attention. The potentials and pitfalls of a “market activism” or “expert activism” as sketched out by publisher David Graham could be analyzed further.²⁶ In addition, the role of publishing in watering down the terms “activist” and “activism” could be critically considered. As Sam Leith noted semi-ironically, the activist brand has become a “publishing trend. Movements came with reading lists, and civilians read them. . . . resistance to capitalism has become just another way of selling things.”²⁷ The importance of zines and other community publications—to use a term elaborated by Mathieu, Parks and Rousculp²⁸—has been receiving increased scholarly attention, and deservedly so. More generally speaking, in an era of possible de-globalization, questions of transnational activism need to be readdressed critically. We hope that this special issue can inspire further research within and beyond these contexts.

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Rachel Noorda is an Associate Professor of English and Director of Book Publishing at Portland State University. Her research is focused on twenty-first century book culture, diaspora communities, international marketing, small business marketing, and entrepreneurship. Dr Noorda is the author of *Entrepreneurial Identity in US Book Publishing in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). She is also the editor for the Business of Publishing strand of the Cambridge University Press series “Publishing and Book Culture”.

Corinna Norrick-Rühl is Professor of Book Studies at the University of Muenster in Germany. Her research focuses on 20th- and 21st-century book culture and publishing, with a special interest in popular formats such as paperback books and book club editions. Recent publications include *Are Books Still “Different”? Literature as Culture and Commodity in a Digital Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2023, co-authored with Caroline Koegler) and *Book Clubs and Book Commerce* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) as well as the edited volume *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (co-edited with Shafquat Towheed, Palgrave, 2022).

Elizabeth le Roux is an Associate Professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria, where she coordinates the Publishing Studies programme. Her research focuses on the history of publishing and book cultures in South Africa and Africa more broadly. Her PhD (2013, University of Pretoria) was later published as *A Social History of the University Presses in Apartheid South Africa* (Brill, 2016). She has also written *Publishing Against Apartheid: A case study of Ravan Press* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) as well as a wide range of articles and book chapters. She is co-editor of the journal *Book History*. She is also closely associated with industry-driven research, for the Publishers’ Association of South Africa, and serves on the Ministerial Task Team for developing a National Book Policy. Before becoming a full-time academic, she worked in the scholarly publishing industry in South Africa.

Notes

¹ Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, eds., *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

² Rachel Schreiber, “Introduction,” in *Modern Print Activism in the United States*, ed. Rachel Schreiber (Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 1.

³ Caroline N Bayne, “#nolitetbastardescarborundorum: Self-Publishing, Hashtag Activism, and Feminist Resistance,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 202.

⁴ See Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65-83; Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,” *Book 2.0* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 3–23.

⁵ Ruth Bush and Madhu Krishnan, “Print Activism in Twenty-First-Century Africa,” *Wasafiri* 31, no. 4 (October 2016): 1.

⁶ Bernd Reiter and Ulrich Oslender, eds., *Bridging Scholarship and Activism: Reflections from the Frontlines of Collaborative Research* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

⁷ Srividya Ramasubramanian and Alexandra N. Sousa, “Communication Scholar-Activism: Conceptualizing Key Dimensions and Practices Based on Interviews with Scholar-Activists,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 49, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 477.

⁸ Jana Möller and Elizabeth le Roux, “Implementing constitutional language provisions through the Indigenous Language Publishing Programme,” *South African Journal of African Languages* 37, no. 2 (July 3, 2017): 203–9.

⁹ Elizabeth le Roux, “Black Writers, White Publishers: A Case Study of the Bantu Treasury Series in South Africa,” *E-Rea, Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone* 11, no. 1 (December 15, 2013).

¹⁰ Elizabeth le Roux and Samantha Buitendach, “The Production and Reception of Deon Meyer’s Works: An Evaluation of the Factors Contributing to Bestseller Status,” *Scrutiny* 2 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 18–34.

¹¹ Elizabeth le Roux, “Repressive Tolerance in a Political Context: Academic Freedom in Apartheid South Africa,” *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (August 2018): 461–66.

¹² Rachel Noorda, “Transnational Scottish Book Marketing to a Diasporic Audience, 1995-2015” (Ph.D. diss., University of Stirling, 2016); Rachel Noorda, “From Waverley to Outlander: Reinforcing Scottish Diasporic Identity through Book Consumption,” *National Identities* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 361–77.

¹³ Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, Rachel Noorda, and Millicent Weber, *International Bestsellers and the Reconfiguring of National Identity for Book Readers Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2023).

¹⁴ Rachel Noorda, “International Success: Selling Niche Titles Beyond the Prime Home Market,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 359-68; Rachel Noorda, “International Entrepreneurial Marketing in the Publishing Industry,” in *Handbook of Entrepreneurship and Marketing*, ed. Ian Fillis and Nick Telford (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 390–401.

¹⁵ Corinna Norrick-Rühl and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “Crossing the Channel: Publishing Translated German Fiction in the UK,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 125–38; Corinna Norrick-Rühl, “‘Stimulating Our Literature and Deepening Our Culture’: Translated Books as Book-of-the-Month Club Selections, 1926 to 1973,” *Quaerendo* 47, no. 3-4 (December 14, 2017): 222–51.

¹⁶ Caroline Koegler and Corinna Norrick-Rühl, *Are Books Still “Different”?: Literature as Culture and Commodity in a Digital Age*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

¹⁷ Claire Bond Potter and Renee Christine Romano, eds., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹⁸ See for instance Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Bayne, “#nolitetebastardescarborundorum.”

²⁰ “2022 Conference: Making Artistic Noise,” American Printing History Association, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://printinghistory.org/2022-conference/>.

²¹ Linda Qiu and Sarahbeth Maney, “Demonstrators Gathered at Supreme Court Lament, and Celebrate, Leaked Draft,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/03/us/politics/supreme-court-protests-abortion.html>; “Potential End to Roe v. Wade Sparks Rallies Outside Supreme Court,” *Reuters*, May 4, 2022 (Slideshow, Image 22/45), <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/potential-end-to-roe-v-wade-sparks-even-idUSRTS7J1W7>.

²² *Commerce du livre, carnaval du livre. Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2020), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/memoires/2020-v11-n2-memoires05373/>.

²³ *Le Livre et l'imprimé engagés. Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2011), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/memoires/2011-v3-n1-memoires1830163/>.

²⁴ s.a., “5 Gründe, warum Verlage auf Sensitivity Reading setzen sollten,” *Boersenblatt.net*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.boersenblatt.net/news/verlage-news/5-gruende-warum-verlage-auf-sensitivity-reading-setzen-sollten-273379>.

²⁵ Kimberley Kinder, *The Radical Bookstore: Counterspace for Social Movements* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Sherrin Frances, *Libraries amid Protest: Books, Organizing, and Global Activism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020).

²⁶ David Graham, “Market Activism: A Publisher’s Perspective,” in *Literary Activism: A Symposium*, ed. Amit Chaudhuri (Norwich: Boiler House press, 2017). Available online at David Graham, “Market Activism: A Publisher’s Perspective,” *Literary Activism* (blog), July 11, 2020, <https://www.literaryactivism.com/market-activism/>.

²⁷ Sam Leith, “How Activists Captured Publishing,” *UnHerd*, August 4, 2021, <https://unherd.com/2021/08/how-activists-captured-publishing/>.

²⁸ Paula Mathieu, Stephen Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp, eds., *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

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