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## TRANSLATING DISABILITY ON STAGE: RESISTANT PERFORMANCES

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### Abstract

Translation in its many forms, as an interlingual practice, as well as a social and human practice, plays a central role across and beyond geographical and cultural borders, as well as across social categories. Theatre translation, including self-translation, deserves further attention as a powerful form of identity construction and an opportunity for artists to make their voice heard. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, combining translation studies with disability and performance studies approaches to disability and disabled performing artists, I will focus on the performance *I got 99 problems, palsy is just one* by the activist comedian Maysoon Zayid. Zayid ironically challenges predominant narratives and prejudices about disability by self-translating her "defective" disabled body on stage. Her performance, available online in 42 languages, has acquired broad political significance, due also to her commitment to safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities.

**Keywords:** Disability culture. Resistant performance. Self-translation. Identity.

### Riassunto

La traduzione, nelle sue varie forme, sia come pratica interlinguistica, che come pratica sociale e umana, svolge un ruolo fondamentale non solo attraverso e oltre confini geografici e culturali, ma anche attraverso categorie sociali. La traduzione teatrale, compresa l'auto-traduzione, meritano ulteriore attenzione in quanto costituiscono una potente forma di costruzione identitaria ed un'opportunità per gli artisti per fare



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sentire la propria voce. Attraverso un approccio interdisciplinare, che mette insieme Translation Studies, con studi sulla disabilità e sulla performance, applicati all'esame della disabilità e dei performance artist con disabilità, esaminerò la performance *I got 99 problems, palsy is just one*, della comica attivista Maysoon Zayid. Zayid ironicamente mette in discussione narrative e pregiudizi predominanti sulla disabilità auto-traducendo in scena il suo corpo disabile in quanto "difettoso". La sua performance, disponibile online in 42 lingue, acquista un valore politico anche grazie al suo impegno costante per la difesa dei diritti delle persone con disabilità.

**Parole chiave:** Cultura della disabilità. Performance di resistenza. Traduzione del sè. Identità

No longer the polite tin-cuppers, waiting for your generous inclusion,  
we are more and more, proud freedom fighters, taking to the stages,  
raising our speech-impaired voices in celebration of who we are.

Cheryl Marie Wade, *The Woman with Juice*

Translation has acquired a key role in the current world, not only and much beyond its traditional function as an interlingual practice from one language to another, but in a broad sense and in its many forms, particularly as a social and human practice across geographical and cultural borders, as well as social categories. Translation, for instance, is central in terms of identity construction and self-translation. The latter, in particular, is intended as translation of one's own identity and as such is a powerful form of translation through which migrant artists, and artists in general, can make their voice heard and become agents of their own identity (see Maio 2021; Inghilleri & Polezzi 2020; Polezzi 2020).

Recent studies on disability as performance address the notion of disability in its several meanings: as performance in everyday life, as a metaphor in dramatic literature, and as the work of disabled performing artists. The first and the latter are particularly relevant to my translation approach to disability, also drawing on from scholarly crossings between performance and feminist disability studies (see Garland-Thompson 2005a; Kuppers 2005; Fraser 2013; Mladenov 2016; Sati & Prasad 2020; Spišiaková 2021). Such an interdisciplinary perspective allows an investigation of the significance of identity construction in personal experience as well as

performances by disabled artists, together with the social nature of predominant notions and perceptions of disability.

In their introduction to the volume, *Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies*, Sandhal & Auslander (2005) claim that disability in everyday life is somehow performed, and then reflected upon and brought on stage by disabled artists, while depictions of disability in dramatic literature affect the performance of disability in everyday life. Such close connections between the performance of disability in life and on stage raise a series of questions and challenge traditional understandings of disability as well as artistic genres. Sandhal and Auslander also remind us that persons with disabilities directly experience Goffman's metaphor of identity construction and Butler's (1988) notion of performativity and that disabled artists consciously bring such experiences on stage in their performances.

Feminist disability studies (see Garland-Thomson 2005a; Hall 2011), focusing on the social processes of identity construction, are equally relevant to the present study. Disability, like race and gender, is in fact socially constructed. These people's identities are perceived as being determined by permanent biological body conditions and are commonly seen as belonging to apparently homogenous social categories, despite the diversity of their physical, intellectual and sensory conditions. Persons with disabilities, as in the case of other minorities, are usually subject, rather than agents, of translation. What happens when disabled performers appear on stage is that they become active identity makers. They act as self-translators questioning the opposition between physically impaired bodies of disabled people and abled bodies - based on the contrast between what is *natural* and what is not – and contribute as activists to the fight against the distinction between first and second-class citizens.

In this essay I am going to focus on the performance *I got 99 problems, palsy is just one* by the activist comedian Maysoon Zayid, co-founder of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, at the 2013 *Ted Women Conference* in San Francisco. I have chosen to focus on this performance for its staging of multiple social and cultural identities, including disability, translated on stage and interlingually translated on youtube through its video reproduction in 42 languages. I will show how she negotiates and challenges predominant narratives about disability and disabled bodies

through several layers of translation and staging of cultural stereotypes. Like other disabled performers and artists, Zayid performs her disabled body and stages disability as a cultural and social construction while claiming her right to exist.

Disability activism, which has become more and more relevant together with activism in other areas of social inequalities, such as racism and sexism, is key to my translation approach to disability. Contemporary translation studies, focusing on the significance of translation and interpreting across language and cultural barriers, increasingly address social oppression and discriminatory discourses against ethnic, gender and language, minorities (see Boéri 2023). A critical translation approach can thus shed light on disabled artists' performances which can play a central role with a view to the safeguard of persons with disabilities' human rights. Both as a translation scholar, through my research, and as the mother of an 11-year-old boy with Down's syndrome, I am committed to promoting social justice and to challenging social and cultural practices reinforcing predominant views of disability (Erevelles 2011). For all these reasons, my analysis of Zayid's performance will be contextualized within the wider movement for the human rights of persons with disabilities, pursued by disabled performance artists, as well as ordinary citizens and non-profit organizations, such as *Art to Heart*, fighting for the rights of disabled Palestinians, and the Palestinian cause at large. Ultimately, like Hip Hop artists who "flip the script" (Porco 2014) of dominant value systems and ableist narratives, both disabled artists and common citizens perform acts of resistance against the stigma of disability.

## 1. Disabled identities on stage

Following on from Sandhal and Auslander, I would like to address some significant questions asked more than a decade ago, which are still in need of an answer. How and to what extent do disabled artists' performances challenge "medical, charity, and freak-show models of disability" (Sandhal & Auslander 2005: 1)? How does the work of disabled performing artists transform and affect artistic genres and audience expectations? Disabled people can be seen as performers in daily life and pass by the audience

staring at them as something out of the ordinary (Mitchell & Synder 2000). As Goffman argues (1959), social identities are closely related to how we are perceived by others, who act as spectators, while we perform to make an impression on them mostly by conforming to social norms. If the way we behave in everyday life affects how others perceive us, identity is the result of social interactions exactly in the same way as disability, rather than being an inherent characteristic of disabled bodies, is socially produced by the interaction of people and their bodies. However, while for Butler (1988) identity is performed unconsciously, persons with disabilities might choose to perform their disabilities and their disabled identities as a form of activism to fight for their rights. For Kuppers, a feminist disabled performance artist and theorist, disabled artists' work "is part of a larger political project, the challenge to, and dismantling of, the stigma of disability" (Kuppers 2005: 152). This is what Ed Roberts, with quadriplegia, among many others, did when fighting to go back to public high school, rather continuing home schooling, when he chose to be "a star, not a helpless cripple" (quoted in Sandhal & Auslander 2005: 3).

Manipulating and subverting prejudices is vital for persons with disabilities, particularly artists, "since the available 'scripts' of disability - both in daily life and in representation - are frustratingly limited and deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination" (Sandhal & Auslander 2005: 3). Catherine Cole, a dancer who became disabled during her life, in describing her dance-theatre performance *Five Foot Feat*, explains that since she only had one leg and had to use crutches, she "became a walking performance art piece, with people stopping to stare or avoiding eye contact all together. But whether people looked or didn't look, I was a performer, a performer in a script I didn't write." And her performance became for her an opportunity to work and shape that spectacle "by giving people permission to look, and to look on my terms" (quoted in Sandhal & Auslander 2005: 4). This is precisely what she and other disabled artists do: they appropriate and reclaim dominant social and cultural "scripts", which categorize and classify disability according to normative paradigms, to challenge them and propose their own narratives while controlling "the terms of the encounter between themselves and their audiences" (Garland-Thomson 2005b: 39).

Disability activists and artists performing disability on stage have been fighting and continue to fight against narratives of disabled people as helpless and defective human beings according to the so-called *disability culture*, that is cultural perceptions of the disability experience, based on stereotypes and representations of disabled bodies as limited exceptions to “normality” paradigms. As Corker & Shakespeare (2002) and Thomas (2006) claim, we need to make a distinction between impairment, related to physical and psychological medical conditions, which exclusively refers to the body, and disability, a social and cultural phenomenon resulting from identity issues. Disability activists and artists challenge such an idea of disability, that is a medical impairment in need of a cure, by performing and translating their own identity and their perceptions and personal experience of disability. If as spectators, thus as citizens, we realize that predominant images of disability, based on the assumption that the disabled body needs to be cured, are cultural constructions, we can begin to understand that the possibility and/or need of a cure to have a “normal” body are perceived so and determined by able-bodied people and imposed on disabled bodies (Cheu 2005). As Ferris reminds us, being aware of “fictionality, which is the heart of aesthetic distance, is crucial to recognizing and remediating the damaging fiction of disability” (Ferris 2005: 67). Disabled artists resist such fiction since “how others who are able-bodied write about and perform our disability experiences is not always how we write about, define, and see ourselves” (Cheu 2005: 136).

Medical care, as an inherent part of the social construction and representations of disability, becomes particularly evident to the audience in performance. Rather than being minimized or hidden, the performer’s disabled body becomes a protagonist, for instance throughout Zayid’s performance, as I am going to show later. Medical care is constantly and ironically referred to so as to claim “the right of the disabled body to exist” (Cheu 2005: 139) and to remind the audience of its double nature as a physical entity and a social label. Performance artists’ commitment to fight against disability culture is similar to what actors, performers, playwrights and theatre directors staging political theatre do.

While according to poststructuralism and postmodernism all theatre is political, Holderness (1992) believes that if a particular theatre text

is political only in terms of its content will not be particularly effective, whereas theatre texts which are also provocative due their form and function will have a more significant impact. I have previously researched alternative strategies adopted in staging foreign theatre texts in the UK, more precisely in key productions of Italian playwrights' work. Those productions challenge common British stage traditions, such as the tendency to focus on stereotypical representations of foreign cultural identities, as well as dominant acting styles. The use of non-standard languages and the commitment of theatre collectives to physical acting are key aspects of what I have defined a *resistant* approach to foreign theatre in the UK (Taviano 2007) that distinguishes itself through socially and politically significant stagings. According to Foster (1985) and Auslander (1992), resistant theatre and performance art challenge predominant ideology and forms of representation. Carlson (1996) defines resistant performances those of disabled performance artists, such as Cheryl Marie Wade in her one-woman show, *The Woman with Juice*, since they subvert hegemonic perceptions of persons with disabilities.

Performances staged by Korean artists and activists, in response to the Sewol ferry disaster and the subsequent South Korean government's cover-ups, functioned as a form of public counter-memory, transforming a national disaster into an opportunity for political and social change (Jeong 2024). A special issue of *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, "Seeking solidarity and wonder through performance", addresses the many forms of solidarity in creative practices by artists from around the world. The variety of forms and contexts of solidarity through artistic practices, as Curtis & Clarke (2024) claim, acquire significance as collective action and resistance and include, among others, those in contexts of violence, intercultural practices and intersectional, feminist, queer, and decolonial approaches.

Similarly performing disability on stage has a social and political value since, as previously argued, it involves and is closely related to social justice and human rights, thus parallel to the translation of disability carried out, for instance, by organizations of persons with disabilities for the safeguard of disability rights, as in the case of an activist campaign promoted by Coordown, the Italian National Coordination of Associations of Persons with Down Syndrome. Fraser (2005) has applied her theory of

social justice to cases of injustice related to gender, class, race and sexuality issues, but not disability. Mladenov adopts Fraser's theory while extending it to include disability as a category of oppression since he claims that:

mechanisms which produce and maintain injustices along other axes of difference such as class or gender cannot be completely understood nor fully dismantled without taking disability into account (Mladenov 2016: 1226).

As an activist performer Zayid has been advocating social justice for persons with disabilities throughout her career, particularly through her performance at the 2013 *Ted Women Conference* in San Francisco, *I got 99 problems, palsy is just one* - thanks to its worldwide distribution - and she has then extended her plea for equality to all minorities, a year later in an independent *Ted Talk* in Athens, *The World is Broken*, to which I will return. She is also the founder of Maysoon's Kids, a scholarship and well-being program for disabled and wounded refugee children in the West Bank. Activism is thus central to hers and the work of many disabled performers, such as Kupperts, who aims to contribute to the *de-naturalisation* of disability (Kupperts 2001: 26), as I am going to show in the next section.

## 2. Resisting disability culture

Zayid (2015) verbally and physically *de-naturalises* her disability right from the beginning of her *Ted Women* performance, *I got 99 problems... palsy is just one* by reminding her audience:

(00: 13) I am not drunk,  
but the doctor who delivered me was.  
He cut my mom six different times  
in six different directions,  
suffocating poor little me in the process.  
As a result, I have cerebral palsy,  
which means I shake all the time.  
Look.  
It's exhausting.  
I'm like Shakira, Shakira meets Muhammad Ali.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This and all citations are from the transcript of Zayid's *Ted Talk*, *I got 99 problems... palsy is just one* (Zayid 2013).



She puts her body centre stage by emphasizing and defining her disability, cerebral palsy, while ironically identifying herself a hybrid resulting from the encounter of the well-known singer Shakira and the professional boxer Muhammad Ali making her audience laugh. She continues by deconstructing predominant misconceptions about disability: it is neither genetic nor infectious, and she plays with other cultural prejudices, such as the idea that a defective body might be the result of evil forces and curses.

(00:45) CP is not genetic.

It's not a birth defect. You can't catch it.

No one put a curse on my mother's uterus,  
and I didn't get it because my parents are first cousins,  
which they are.

(01:03) It only happens from accidents,  
like what happened to me on my birth day.

(01:07) She also reminds spectators that she is not on stage to inspire  
other people.

Now, I must warn you,  
I'm not inspirational.

While criticizing predominant views about disability and its possible causes, she also ironically plays with her parents' identity to then reveal that she has cerebral palsy simply by accident. She thus unsettles cultural prejudices about disability as an exclusively genetic condition affecting a minority, while describing it as a condition which might affect all of us at some point in our life.

(01:13) And I don't want anyone  
in this room to feel bad for me,  
because at some point in your life,  
you have dreamt of being disabled.  
Come on a journey with me.  
It's Christmas Eve, you're at the mall,  
you're driving around in circles looking for parking,  
and what do you see?  
Sixteen empty handicapped spaces.  
And you're like, "God, can't I just be a little disabled?"

Here she subverts a prevailing view of persons with disabilities as exceptional and inspirational people, a pietistic view which reinforces the perception that they represent a class of their own. She does so by staging and subverting non-disabled people's common self-perception as superior human beings compared to disabled people. She jokes about the first imagining and desiring to be in the second's shoes, at least a little or for a short period of time. As persons with disabilities and caregivers know very well, in Italy for instance, non-disabled people often unlawfully occupy such spaces claiming that they do so just for few minutes or the necessary time to drop somebody off, without realizing that they violate somebody's else right while preventing them from occupying that space when they truly need it. As Hadley argues, the terms and labels defining disability that disabled artists critique, as well as reclaim, such as "handicapped spaces" here, become "politicized performative gestures" in their own right (Hadley 2021: 531).

Zayid's comic narration of an anecdote about her interview (Zayid 2013) during the US TV show, *Count down with Keith Olbermann*, when she was given a wheelchair to sit on, rather than a normal chair, is a perfect example of how such labels, grouping persons with disabilities in an apparently homogenous social class, affect their lives. Like other social minorities and categories, they are believed to have the same needs despite a wide range of physical and cognitive differences (Garland-Thomson 2005a). More precisely, as Zayid puts it, "disability is as visual as race" (11: 24) and "people with disabilities are the largest minority in the world, and the most underrepresented in entertainment" (11: 43).

(10:00) So I looked at the stage manager  
and I'm like, "Excuse me, can I have another chair?"  
And she looked at me and she went,  
"Five, four, three, two ..."  
And we were live, right?  
So I had to grip onto the anchor's desk  
so that I wouldn't roll off the screen during the segment,  
and when the interview was over, I was livid.  
I had finally gotten my chance and I blew it,  
and I knew I would never get invited back.  
But not only did Mr. Olbermann invite me back,

he made me a full-time contributor,  
and he taped down my chair.

Not only is she not asked whether she needs a wheelchair, but she is literally seated and quickly pushed in on a wheelchair when the TV program goes on air. However, she surprises her audience by proving herself wrong since she is invited back to the TV show and becomes a full-time contributor, adding a comic note about her chair which is later taped down.

Garland-Thomson's work (2005b) on disabled women performance artists is particularly relevant to Zayid's performance since all these artists, as Garland-Thomson claims, control and shape the dynamics of their audience's "staring at disability" by creating performance art on the basis of their personal experience as persons with disabilities. These women artists challenge those stares that they face and resist in everyday life by bringing their disability on stage. Like them, Zayid shows that disability, rather than being an exception, is part of human diversity, as opposed to what the predominant ableist ideology makes us believe. She places disability below her others labels, also socially and culturally shaped, which are part of her complex identity:

(01: 46) Also, I've got to tell you,  
I've got 99 problems, and palsy is just one.  
If there was an Oppression Olympics,  
I would win the gold medal.  
I'm Palestinian, Muslim,  
I'm female, I'm disabled,  
and I live in New Jersey.

By creating the "Oppression Olympics" metaphor, she stages her multilayered and intersectional identity, well beyond her cerebral palsy, to include her other identities, being Palestinian, Muslim, and a woman, while placing her disability right at the end. As in the case of other women of colour in the US, who are subject to intersecting patterns of sexism and racism (Crenshaw 1991), Zayid reminds her audience that complexity and uniqueness is an inherent part of humanity by performing her life story combining several social and cultural differences. Disability, instead of being something unexpected that should be the hidden, becomes human.

“In other words, she stresses her differences, rather than minimizing them, playing with existential and aesthetic anxiety that nondisabled people feel around people with disabilities” (Garland-Thompson 2005b: 40).

Existential anxiety has to do with the fear that disabilities can interfere and limit functional capacities, while aesthetic anxiety causes discrimination against disabled people because of their defective bodies or behaviour (Hahn 1988). Like other disabled women artists, Zayid challenges and subverts existential and functional anxieties. In her one-woman show she forges “an autobiographical form of feminist disability performance art that unsettles cultural presumptions about humanity, femaleness, disability, and self (Garland-Thomson 2005b: 39).

(02: 29) A lot of people with CP don't walk,  
but my parents didn't believe in “can't.”

My father's mantra was,  
“You can do it, yes you can can.”

(02:40)

(Laughter)

So, if my three older sisters were mopping,  
I was mopping.

If my three older sisters went to public school,  
my parents would sue the school system  
and guarantee that I went too,  
and if we didn't all get A's,  
we all got my mother's slipper.

Zayid tells her audience of how her father treated her exactly in the same way as her other sisters, while repeating his mantra, the performance key punchline “You can do it, yes you can can”, and at the same time she plays with predominant medicalized perceptions of disability, including her father's:

(05: 01) Summer vacations often consisted of my father trying to heal me,  
so I drank deer's milk,  
I had hot cups on my back,  
I was dunked in the Dead Sea,  
and I remember the water burning my eyes  
and thinking, “It's working! It's working!”

Her father, however, despite being influenced by exclusive notions of disability as a medical condition, fights against an education system which discriminates against persons with disabilities and manages to send his daughter to school, like any other student, including his other daughters. Zayid, in other words, like other disabled artists, creates art from her personal experience, common to other disabled people, while mounting “a critique of the politics of appearance, the medicalization of human variation [...] and the assumption that disability is embodied inferiority” (Garland Thompson 2005b: 40). She carries on her father’s activism with her brother years later explaining that she started right after being excluded from playing the part of a disabled character in a play at college:

(07: 14) This was a part that I was literally born to play  
they gave it to a non-palsy actress.  
College was imitating life.  
Hollywood has a sordid history  
of casting able-bodied actors to play disabled onscreen.

(09: 07) In 2003, my brother from another mother and father  
Dean Obeidallah and I started  
the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival,  
now in its 10th year.  
Our goal was to change the negative image of Arab-Americans in media,  
while also reminding casting directors  
that South Asian and Arab are not synonymous.

(09: 28)

(Laughter)

(09:31)

Mainstreaming Arabs was much, much easier  
than conquering the challenge against the stigma against disability.

Zayid’s line about the difficulties in overcoming stigma against disability as apparently more significant than those related to the treatment of Arabs in the media ironically emphasises the intersectional nature of social prejudices and obstacles, which have affected her life, as she reminds us through the metaphor of the Oppression Olympics. Interestingly enough, this line has recently proved wrong by the cancelation of her show, a point to which I will come back later. She concludes this, and other performances, by repeating her name followed by her punchline:

(13:45) My name is Maysoon Zayid,  
and if I can can, you can can.

The significance of her naming strategy and the repetition of her mantra becomes even stronger through and thanks to translation, as will be shown in the next section.

### 3. Translating disability

In *Storm Reading*, first staged at Lobero Theatre, Santa Barbara, California in 1996, American playwright, actor and disability rights advocate, Neil Marcus, verbally and physically delivers disability through his performance piece, like Zayid. More precisely, the performance begins with Marcus who struggles to speak for forty seconds leaving his audience unable to understand before a female interpreter appears on stage. Forty seconds later Marcus utters the final word of a sentence “h-h-h-human” and a male interpreter, Matt Ingersoll, appears from the audience, gets on stage, and repeats Marcus’ speech: “People are always watching me... they’re watching to see how well I do this thing called human” (Marcus 1996).

The presence of an interpreter as an inherent part to Marcus’ performance is a fascinating instance of translation and disability made visible on stage while unveiling and challenging predominant views about disability as well as common views of translation. First of all, translation becomes a play within a play. It functions as a central, essential element of the performance piece without which the performance itself would make no sense to its viewers. In other words, translation makes Marcus’ speech understandable while contributing to its possible meanings and connotations.

Translation made visible on stage thanks to the physical presence of an interpreter, who also acts as a performer, reminds us that all forms of communication, including intralingual translation, involve acts of interpretation. As Metzger (1999) claims in relation to sign language, the roles of the speaker, the interpreter, and the audience are not so well defined since one might wonder who really the speaker is, whether, for instance, the interpreter or the disabled artist. In reinscribing the roles in the triangle of communication, the interpreter’s key function in making Marcus’ performance accessible shows and reminds us that accessibility concerns

us all, not just persons with disabilities, as Greco & Romero-Fresco (2023) argue. In this case, able-bodied spectators, as well as disabled ones, need intralingual translation to understand the performance. Translation thus also contributes to challenge and reverse social and cultural perceptions of disability by putting us as able-bodied viewers in persons with disabilities' shoes. As Brueggemann claims, disability "highlights the boundaries of the "human condition" since it is commonly perceived as "supernormal, sub-normal, and abnormal. It is portrayed as essentially human; yet it is also portrayed as essentially not human." (Brueggemann 2005: 20) Marcus' performance questions these assumptions by making us experience common obstacles to accessibility, and thus realize the human nature of disability.

Zayid's performance is another yet different example of how translation's visibility runs parallel and contributes to make disability visible in performance. In this case translated transcripts are available on the right hand of our screens and are synchronized with Zayid's performance. While translation here is not an inherent part of the performance itself, Zayid's political commitment for the safeguard of persons with disabilities' human rights is translated and made available to viewers from all over the world in 42 different languages thanks to the TED Open Translation project. As we can read on the TED website, "TED Translators are a global crowdsourced community of volunteers who subtitle TED Talks, and enable the inspiring ideas in them to crisscross languages and borders" for a total of over 50,000 translators and 115 languages. The program was created by volunteer translators, launched in 2009 and expanded in 2012 to include transcriptions of TED talks, which also make them accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. The fact that the names of translators are available is another important element of translation's visibility, and is part of the TED collaborative project which recognizes the active role of its volunteer translators.

Collaboration, which can simply refer to the work of two or more translators producing a translation together, can also be part of different types of translation and translation projects. Nowadays it has become synonym of several notions and practices, such as community translation, volunteer translation, fansubbing and crowdsourcing, often examples of non-profit projects and movements with social and political commitments (see Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez 2006; O'Hagan 2009; O'Brien 2011; Boeri

2012). The volunteer translators of Zayid's performance collaborated and discussed on how to translate punch lines and wordplays in different languages on the TedBlog, and Zayid appreciated their dedication and commitment in translating her talk:

Every time a new language was added, I would post it on Facebook because it made me so happy. As a bilingual comic, I know how hard it is to translate comedy and I love everything these volunteers did, especially in tackling 'can can.' I'm thrilled that so many people were willing to take on this challenge. Together we proved that comedy really is a universal language." (quoted in Torgovnick May 2014)



Fig. 1 Picture of Maysoon Zayid available at TedBlog (Torgovnick May 2014).

Together with the discussion reported in the blog, this image of Zayid and the translation of her punchline "If I can can, you can can" in different languages makes even more evident and visible the role and importance of translation. It is thanks to translation, and the work of volunteer translators, that Zayid's performance becomes available to people from all over the world. It is thanks to these translators, and their strategies in adapting her punchline, either through the repetition of the modal can or by



conjugating it, as the French translator has done, that her performance can make audiences laugh beyond language barriers while making them aware of the social and political implications of predominant representations of disability across cultures and geographical borders.

Similar and yet different from Marcus' translational performance, such a collaborative translation experience acquires a social and political function in line with Zayid's performance of disability and advocacy of equal rights. Her personal commitment in fact needs to be contextualized within the wider and global movement for disability rights by disabled artists whose performances become significant as "political translation." Doerr conceives "political translation" as "a disruptive and communicative practice" (Doerr 2018: 1) against social injustice and as a tool to empower marginalized citizens. While focusing on the role of activist translators who facilitate the democratic participation of disempowered citizens, Doerr's view of political translation applies to the role of any activist citizen who challenges social inequalities. As I have shown elsewhere (Taviano 2024) common citizens, including persons with disabilities, and associations pursuing the recognition of their human rights, can acquire such a role in a range of social and political contexts. Disabled artists, in particular, can have a voice through self-translation and become visible as makers of their own identity.

Zayid aimed to do so, for instance, in 2015 when she gave a talk, at a local TEDx event, produced independently of the TED Conferences, in Athens, entitled *The World is Broken*. She extended and transformed her delivery and performance of disability of her previous Ted Women Talk to a plea for equality for all citizens, by encouraging people to fight against violence towards women, against the killing of children and all civilians, against bullying online and by pursuing one own's dream to be happy.

More recently, ten years after her 2013 *Ted Talk*, during an interview Zayid explained that her performance scheduled for the New York Arab Comedy Festival, of which she was co-founder, was cancelled due to the number of threats that they received. She emphasized how this was revealing of US culture and society at the time of the Israeli-Palestinian war given that "a Palestinian, disabled, funny girl has received so many Zionist threats that she cannot even step on stage" (Zayid 2023) calling into question her

line “mainstreaming Arabs was much, much easier than conquering the challenge against the stigma against disability” dating back to her 2013 performance. Zayid’s performances, inherently connected to her commitment to the fight for persons with disabilities’ rights, is in turn strongly related to other activist campaigns and initiatives for the Palestinian cause.

#### 4. Disability culture rap

According to the 2024 *Thematic Report* by ACAPS, an independent non-profit information provider specializing in the assessment of humanitarian needs, Israeli attacks and blockade of Gaza after Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 have had a much higher impact on persons with disabilities for a number of reasons, including being separated from their caregivers and life-saving devices, for being unable to find a shelter or because they could not have access to water, food, and medicine. In general persons with disabilities are much more vulnerable in contexts of war since they have more difficulties in accessing humanitarian assistance than many others, and their number grows significantly during long-term conflicts. Zayid testifies to and fights against the terrible living conditions in the Gaza strip also through a series of short videos available on her website.<sup>2</sup>

Together with well-known activists, such as Zayid, and perhaps precisely because disability affects such a high number of people, their voice in denouncing violence and international neglect is starting to be heard, both locally and internationally, as in the case of disabled Palestinians, who aim to educate common citizens to the importance of equality for all people, including persons with disabilities, through their *Disability Justice* project and video (see Zhou-Lee 2023), while reciprocally offering support and information. *Art to Heart* is yet another non-profit organization based in Palestine, founded in 2018 by Suha Khuffash, which aims to empower persons with disabilities through the arts:

change the narrative and challenge social norms and preconceptions in Palestine regarding those with disability through the arts. It is now time to end discrimination against persons with disabilities, to stop perceiving

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2. <https://maysoon.com/bio/>.

them as objects of pity or charity, and instead recognising, celebrating, and advocating for their rights, their humanity, their inherent value, and their extraordinary potential (Several authors n/d).

Similarly, as previously explained, Zayid is actively involved in the fight for persons with disabilities' rights through the charity she has founded, Maysoon's Kids, for disabled and wounded refugee children in the West Bank, which she regularly visits to conduct training sessions for parents and comedy workshops for disabled children, since she believes in the therapeutic, as well as social and political value, of theatre, and comedy, in particular.

Zayid's political commitment follows on from the work of other activist disabled performers, such as Wade, one among the first disability rights advocates writing, producing and acting in the Disability Culture Rap video (Wade 2000). In the video she acts with other disabled people and artists, displaying her disability and disabled body while celebrating difference and pride, claiming their freedom and right to choose, their sexuality, as well as denouncing discrimination and calling for unity and independence. The video also provides an insight into key moments of the historical struggle for persons with disabilities rights through very powerful images. Disability Culture Rap was part of a campaign carried out by Advocating Change Together, a disability rights organization, which has been leading the self-advocacy movement in the US since 1979. As previously argued, all these artists actively contribute to the fight for the full recognition of persons with disabilities' rights through resistant performances which subvert hegemonic views of persons with disabilities as second-class citizens.

## 5. Conclusions

The commitment and experience of disabled performance artists is parallel to that of diasporic Arab Hip Hoppers who challenge predominant images of Arabs as terrorists codified in mainstream Western discourses. Through their art, performances, songs and videos, as well as their political commitment, they resist such images while translating their identities as activist citizens. The Syrian-American Offendum and the Iraqi-Canadian the

Narcycist, for instance, have done so through multimedia projects, such as *Arab Winter* consisting of installations, paintings, collage, photography and calligraphy, as well as by teaching courses on Hip Hop to encourage awareness and creative thinking. The prefigurative role (Baker 2016) of Hip Hop, that it to say its contribution to make a difference in the here and now, is common to the experience of all those disabled artists' work whose significance extends well beyond music and/or theatre performances to include pedagogical projects as well as fundraising to provide practical help and support to populations in needs. This is the case of Omar Offendum's record sales donated to Iraqi children with congenital diseases to pay for their surgery, together with another fundraising initiative for the production of limbs with 3d technology for children with amputated limbs, as well as Maysoon's Kids charity for Palestinian disabled and wounded refugee children. Disabled performance artists, together with Hip Hop musicians, among other artists, each of them through their individual performances and activism, contribute to the collective transformation of persons with disabilities' physical and intellectual conditions into aesthetic experiences while fighting against social oppression.

A translation approach to the delivery and performance of disability by disabled artists who flip the script to unveil the fictional and social nature of disability culture and ableist scripts through self-translation and stagings of their own bodies and identities is particularly useful in addressing the pervasiveness of social labels and categorizations (see also Hadley 2021). By focusing on how disability is performed and translated on stage by activist disabled performers, as I have attempted to do here, the political value of those performances, as key elements of the global movement for disabled rights, becomes evident while forcing us to interrogate ourselves on our responsibility as able-bodied spectators and common citizens. In *Storm reading* Marcus explains:

Some people, when they see my twisted frame, dystonic disarray, embrace the storm. Their eyes light up and they rush to hug me as a long-lost brother, as if embracing a storm was food for their soul. I can teach you to read a storm. [...] Disability is not a brave struggle or courage in the face of adversity, disability is an art (Marcus 1996).

Disability as a form of art, and different forms of art by persons with disabilities, remind us that the centrality of the disabled body, with its unique characteristics and human imperfections, is closely related and cannot be separated from a person's value and identity, and that bodies contribute to who we are as human beings actively making choices within a social and political context. Furthermore, disability arts in many forms create spaces and environments where persons with disabilities can share and promote an awareness of disabled identities. As Macqueen Black (2018) claims, while celebrating the US National Disability Arts Collection (NDACA) for its role in providing us with the history of disabled people and the arts and their contribution in changing the law, "it is the barriers of an inaccessible world that makes disability political."

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