YES WE CAMP! Protest Rhetoric in Times of Disaster

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YES WE CAMP!

Protest rhetoric in times of disaster: Citizens' activism in post-earthquake L'Aquila

Saggi

Il terremoto del 6 aprile 2009 a L'Aquila ha causato 309 vittime e distrutto il centro storico e la maggior parte dei quartieri residenziali della cittadina abruzzese. La gestione centralizzata dell'emergenza attuata dal governo Berlusconi attraverso la Protezione Civile ha generato una serie di proteste a livello locale contro l'approccio *top-down* nella gestione dell'emergenza e delle politiche di ricostruzione. Durante l'estate 2009, nel contesto emergenziale della realtà locale post-terremoto, gruppi di «cittadini-attivisti» hanno organizzato una serie di mobilitazioni per chiedere l'inclusione delle prospettive dei residenti dell'Aquila nel discorso pubblico sui processi di ricostruzione politica, materiale, e sociale della città abruzzese dopo il disastro. In questo saggio verranno analizzate le modalità pubbliche di protesta e le strategie di *civic-engagement* degli attivisti aquilani attraverso un'analisi retorico-etnografica di due proteste avvenute durante il G8 aquilano nel 2009: «Yes We Camp!» e «The Last Ladies». Attraverso questi due *case studies*, questo saggio si propone di contribuire all'approfondimento di riflessioni teoriche sulle relazioni e interazioni complesse tra le dimensioni della realtà locale e materiale del disastro e le sue diverse rappresentazioni attraverso i mass media e i social media, e tra l'attivismo digitale e le relative modalità e strategie di mobilitazione realizzate a livello locale.

Keywords: Activism, protest rhetoric, ethnography, locality, L'Aquila, Berlusconi, G8.

1.   Introduction: Mobilizations in the seismic crater

Verba Volant, Sisma Manent.
Epicentro Solidale Citizens' Committee, 2009

On April 6, 2009, an earthquake of a 6.3 magnitude struck L'Aquila. The earthquake wreaked massive destruction on the medieval town, reducing to rubble much of the historic, economic, and social heart of the city. Downtown L'Aquila was declared a «red zone», closed to the public and garrisoned by the Italian army. 309 people died during the night of April 6, the majority of L'Aquila's 70,000 residents lost their

homes, many lost their businesses and jobs, and all the local residents experienced the disintegration of their social life and sense of community. The post-earthquake desolation in L'Aquila and the Italian government's top-down management of the emergency through the Civil Protection Agency (CPA) created a difficult situation that led to the rise of cross-partisan «citizens' activism»[1] to demand public participation and the inclusion of the local residents' perspectives in the post-earthquake political discourse.

Post-earthquake mobilizations in L'Aquila – organized and coordinated through several «citizens committees» – highlighted both the problematic governmental discourse about the situation of local emergency, and the national mainstream media representations of the disaster. By exposing the material destruction of L'Aquila through several protests, and by voicing their opinions about the need of specific disaster-management policies in the aftermath of the quake, the activists mobilized to disseminate their own perspectives on the post-disaster situation. They contested the media representations of the effective management of the emergency and questioned Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's narrative of the «miraculous recovery» in L'Aquila. Local citizens saw these official media and political discourses as negatively affecting the future of the reconstruction by portraying L'Aquila's situation as one already solved, and miraculously so. Furthermore, the Aquilani activists leveraged the material destruction to disseminate local narratives and perspectives about life in the post-earthquake plight. Such narratives served the purposes of recreating the sense of community shattered by the earthquake, contrasting the mainstream media portrayals of L'Aquila's situation in the national and international media, and voicing the citizens' political stances about the need of a local reconstruction.

The mass media coverage of the G8 in L'Aquila during summer 2009, the media portrayal of the management of the emergency, the media spectacles organized to be televised, and the governmental rhetoric of the «miraculous recovery» are all examples of the problematic representations of the experience of L'Aquila citizens in the aftermath of the disaster. In the words of a woman interviewed in one of the many tent camps in which the evacuees resided for months after the main quake, the reality in L'Aquila was «another thing»: it was «the complete opposite of what they show on tv» («Yes We Camp!», 2011).

The Aquilani activists, in brief, mobilized to act on their affective and traumatic experiences within the materiality of destruction of the post-quake context, to contest the power relations experienced during the local state of emergency, and to

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[1] I use the term «citizens' activism» in the sense attributed to them by the Aquilani. They used those terms to describe their status as inhabitants of the town concerned about its future reconstruction, and to indicate anyone involved in the post-earthquake discourse, independently from specific individual political affiliation.

respond to the circulation of media representations that failed to capture the «reality»[2] experienced by the locals after the earthquake. In their words, the local activists mobilized to express the «local perspective on the disaster»[3], to pinpoint the «distorted portrayals»[4] circulating in the mainstream media, and to call attention to the «political exploitation of their dramatic experiences»[5]. In order to counteract the joint efforts of the Italian government and the mainstream media (notoriously intertwined during the Berlusconi years[6]) in managing the public portrayal of L'Aquila's disaster, the «citizens' committees»[7] of activists were determined to create a counter-discourse to illustrate their perspectives and voice their opinions about the future of their city.

During the last decade, «citizens' committees» became a frequent phenomenon in the Italian political scene. According to sociologist Chiara Sebastiani (2001), the committees are spontaneous social organizations, weakly structured, and composed of citizens who meet to discuss and debate problems that affect a limited area. They are characterized by local identity, flexible organizational structure, high level of participation, low level of coordination, and action strategies that favor the protest. The citizens' committees have «a hybrid character, halfway between interest groups and social movements, oscillating from lobbying and participatory demands» (Sebastiani, 2001) and they are a kind of political action that takes place outside traditional political parties as an independent «exercise of citizenship» (*ibidem*). This mode of citizenship engagement was widely adopted in L'Aquila after the earthquake: the groups of self-professed «citizens' activists» organized within several citizens' committees – each concerned with specific issues or themes for local intervention. There was a citizens' committee to deal with the reconstruction issues («Assemblea Cittadina», i.e. Citizens' Assembly), a few concerned specifically with social integration issues («Comitato 3e32», i.e. Committee 3e32, «Epicentro Solidale», i.e. Solidarity Epicenter), and even one lobbying for investigating the public communication of risk of the Major Risk Committee before the earthquake («Comitato Parenti delle Vittime del Terremoto», i.e. Committee of the Relatives of the Victims of the Earthquake).

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[2] See the many journalistic accounts of L'Aquila's post-earthquake situation (Bonaccorsi, Nalbone, and Venti, 2010; Caporale, 2011; Erbani, 2010; Puliafito and Nebbia, 2011.)

[3] A. C. Personal communication, 2010. Throughout this essay, I anonymized the testimonies of the activists by reporting only their initials, and the year of the oral history cited.

[4] F. P., 2013.

[5] A. C., 2013.

[6] For more about Silvio Berlusconi's conflict of interest and the state of Italian media pluralism, see Hibberd (2007).

[7] For more about the constitution of L'Aquila's «citizens' committees» see Padovani (2010); Farinosi and Treré (2014).

In the rest of this essay, I first contextualize this study within the fields of communication, media, and activism studies. Secondly, I situate the study within relevant conversations in the subfield of rhetoric scholarship about embodied/emplaced protest rhetoric. Thirdly, I discuss my methodological approach that mixes rhetorical analysis with ethnographic and empiric fieldwork. Finally, I conclude the essay with a rhetorical-ethnographic account of the «Yes We Camp!» and the «Last Ladies March», the counter-events to the 2009 G8 Summit in L'Aquila.

2.   Activism, rhetoric, media, and locality

Since 2011, with the Arab Spring, the rise of the Occupy movement, and the massive rallies of the European *Indignados*, digital activism and digital democracy have generated lively and sustained discussions, both in the news media and the academic world. Indeed, questions concerning the influence of new technologies on democratic practices and the possibilities that growing connectivity and digital media may offer for social and political change (Bennett, 2013; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) have constituted what is perhaps one of the most animated ongoing conversations in the field of communication studies. The study of contemporary protest today is in fact strongly invested in exploring how publics have migrated to the network-based and digitized arena of the Internet and are adopting the new channels it offers for catalyzing resistance.

Scholarly inquiry in digital media activism has produced important insights about the role of new media technologies as connective tools for coordinating protests and their importance in shaping our public and democratic life. Such research has taught us, for instance, that new media do not simply provide activists with the tools for horizontal coordination of grassroots protest but affect activism and democratic practices in deeper and more complex ways. As Victor Pickard (2006) noted, the embodied networks of protestors across multiple places and spaces seem to increasingly reflect the hyperlinked logics of the digitally networked environment itself. Furthermore, as Douglas Rushkoff (2011) remarked about the Occupy Wall Street Movement, publics today appear also to be moving the Internet's creative modalities of expression and circulation into the streets.

Despite its merits, the growing scholarly focus on digital activism in the study of contemporary protest in communication studies risks underestimating the links between the digital and the material dimensions of embodiment and emplacement in protest which are, however, crucial to better understand netizens' efforts to foster social change on a local and global scale. Specifically, it is increasingly impor-

tant to bridge the gap between the study of digital activism and the analysis of the situated «modalities»[8] (Asen and Brouwer, 2010) of protest and civic engagement that it generates. In the field of rhetoric scholarship, Kevin De Luca *et al.* (2012) analyzed the Occupy Wall Street movement to show how new media offer new possibilities for activism that did not exist previously, and argued that their use fosters an ethic of individual and collective «perpetual participation» in embodied protests. Ron Greene and Kevin Douglas Kuswa (2012) also analyzed Occupy Wall Street to show how the rhetorical exchange between places of protest, such as the connections between the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, constructs a horizontal «regional accent» that fuels the production of new material places of protest.

My essay builds upon this growing body of conversations within the subfield of rhetorical studies that explore the relations between the modalities of engagement realized through digital media and emplaced/embodied activism. Specifically, this essay contributes to ongoing efforts to highlight the relations between netroots activism and the «public modalities» (Asen and Brouwer, 2010) of citizenship engagement, those situated dynamics through which embodied protests are publicly articulated and disseminated. In order to problematize the connections among engaged citizens, new media, and material relations of power in their specific political contexts, I argue that it is important to shift scholarly attention to the inter-relatedness of the dimensions of materiality, space, embodiment, and technology to better understand how they work jointly in fostering social change. I attend to this task by connecting the study of the materiality of democratic practices in the era of new media to the focus on protest and citizenship engagement from a relational perspective.

Relational scholarship, media, and materiality

The complicated relationships and uneven dynamics between mainstream media and social movements have also received much academic attention since the late 60s from scholars in different fields, including sociology, political science, and communication. Patrick McCurdy, in his cross-disciplinary review of the scholar-

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[8] Throughout this essay, I use the term «public modalities» and its derivated such as «modalities of citizenship engagement» and «modalities of protest», in Asen and Brouwer's (2010) conceptualization, namely as a metaphor that foregrounds «productive arts of crafting publicity» (*ibidem*) and allows scholars to focus critical attention on the ways in which citizens engage in public activities. In reviving a classical rhetorical vision of technê through the modality metaphor, Asen and Brouwer suggest that public engagement should be thought of and critically analyzed as a «mode» that is an active and purposeful process enacted by agents intending to bring about social change.

ship about this «contentious and longstanding history» (2012: 244) about media and movements, identified and described two main approaches in the relevant scholarship: «representational» and «relational» research (*ibidem*). Representational scholarship, in the last three decades, has studied the ways in which social movements are portrayed and «framed» by media, while relational scholarship has focused on the «asymmetrical relationship between social movements, the contestation of media representation and the media strategies of social movements» (*ibidem*). In this essay, I focus my attention on the relational dynamics between the post-earthquake movements in L'Aquila and their modes of engagement with mainstream and alternative media to contest the problematic representations of the local post-disaster situation. However, I also aim to extend the relational approach to the study of social movements and counterpublicity beyond the exclusive focus on the dimension of mediation and towards the inclusion of the dimensions of materiality (Selzer and Crowley, 1999; Hawhee, 2009; Biesecker and Lucaites, 2010; Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, 2010; Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012), texturality (Conley and Dickinson, 2010), and locality (Endres and Senda-Cook, 2011). Specifically, I argue that looking at materiality and locality in the study of social movement rhetoric can highlight the connections between online activism and situated public modalities of engagement, and also account for the relations between the local material contexts in which mobilizations come to life, and the ways in which such contexts affect the inventional processes and democratic practices of the activists.

Locality as rhetorical heuristic to study protest rhetoric

Throughout the last decade rhetoric and communication scholars have developed new and more flexible conceptual tools and critical methods to study social change in an increasingly fragmented and interconnected world. They have also expanded their object of study from discrete social movements to discursive fields and arenas such as publics and counterpublics (Warner, 2002; Asen and Brouwer, 2001), and focused on the different channels of mediation and the diverse modalities through which social change occurs. Brian Ott (2011) identified five main heuristics by reviewing recent scholarship on resistance and social change: materiality, visuality, corporeality, performativity, and publicity. These five heuristics have introduced new conceptual lenses to analyze social resistance. Nevertheless, those heuristics are not to be considered as an exhaustive set of approaches in the study of resistive rhetoric: as technology and communication continue to evolve and change, so will the modalities of social resistance. Therefore, scholars must continue to conceptualize new

heuristics that are attuned to the historical, social, and political context analyzed. This essay will contribute in doing so by directing attention to the L'Aquila protests as a case study, and by outlining the heuristic of *locality* and focusing on the ways in which the local context contributes to shape the inventional resources of the activists within geographically bounded movements.

The approach of research described thus far is grounded on the assumption that rhetoric is a situated activity and as such it is shaped by, and it contributes to shape, the contexts of its enactment. In effect, it is unsurprising to notice that people in different countries, situations, or times use different modalities to engage with public life. Locality is a productive concept for this study because it contributes to highlight the connections between the modalities of protest and the inventional resources available to citizens and activists in a given spatio-cultural context, and it also helps in identifying the specificity of symbolic, embodied, and material modes of engagement within determined historical, social, and cultural settings. The concept of locality proposed in this essay aligns with the notion of «texturality» (Conley and Dickinson, 2010) and – consistently with the relational approach to the study of movements – aims at «texturalizing» protest rhetoric by broadening the scope of analysis to the wide network of situated relations that allow for certain rhetorical modes of protest to arise and be articulated in the uniqueness of their own context. Like texturality, locality foregrounds the materiality of public democratic practices, as it acknowledges the rhetoricity of the material, and the materiality of rhetoric. Locality does not focus exclusively on bodies and performativity, places and spaces, objects and materiality, or language and mediated images. Instead, locality aims to highlight the inter-relatedness of all these dimensions, and at considering them as a whole, a network of relations to disentangle in order to better understand how activists and citizens act upon their realities through modalities of public discourse that are shaped, and in turn contribute to re-shape and bring forth change in the locale in which they circulate.

Locality, by definition, directs the scholarly attention to a specific place, or to a spatially situated reality enclosed within clear boundaries. The term origins from the Latin *locus*, meaning place both in a literal and conceptual sense, similarly to the Greek term *topos*. But *locus* also has figurative meanings that range from condition, situation, circumstance, opportunity, and moment in time. It is precisely this connotation coming from the Latin *locus*, namely the idea of a conceptual place, which informs the notion of locality proposed here. In brief, the heuristic of locality does not simply entail identifying and cataloguing the topics and issues associated to protest discourse in relation to a specific place. Rather, as a critical lens it aims to generate a better understanding of the ways in which different rhetorical possibilities or oppor-

tunities arise in specific contexts or circumstances. Locality, therefore, is a rhetorical heuristic to operationalize the relational approach typical of social movements studies to the rhetorical analysis of citizens' activism in L'Aquila.

Rhetorical ethnography, oral history, participant observation

The main methodology for my analysis is rhetorical criticism enriched by participant observation and rhetorical ethnography (Hauser, 1999, 2011; Pezzullo, 2007; Clair, 2011; Hess, 2011; Middleton and Senda-Cook, 2011). The most appropriate methodological approach to investigate rhetoric-in-action that aligns with the locality heuristic proposed here is ethnographic fieldwork. Specifically, «rhetorical ethnographies» are particularly useful for rhetoricians interested in adopting a locality approach to study situated protest rhetoric:

> Rhetorical field research facilitates an investigation not only into how symbols, language, and discourse order life, but also into the ways that individuals use rhetoric in fleeting everyday instances to get things done. Fieldwork helps us examine the ways that rhetoric manifests from and circulates consequentially within the dynamic places, practices, ideologies, relationships and material conditions of every day life (Rai, 2015).

According to Rai, rhetorical ethnographies can provide a method for studying «rhetoric in action, that foregrounds the relationship among rhetoric, power, agencies, materialities, ideologies, and contexts» (*ibidem*). Rhetorical ethnography as a method represents a particularly appropriate ally of the conceptual heuristic of locality presented above. These two tools share a perspective and conception of rhetoric that calls for the integration of «fieldwork» or inhabitation and presence of the rhetorical critic in the context of analysis.

Specifically, both locality and rhetorical ethnography aim to foreground the relations between the material and the symbolic: the emplaced/embodied dimensions, and the «inventional resources» embedded within particular contexts and localities. For this essay, a locality approach integrated with participant observation and rhetorical ethnography will make it possible to draft a detailed account of the experiences, situations, and meanings circulating in the field of enactment of the protests that are only available through inhabitation and that are only accessible by «being there», being present in the locale analyzed. The unique characteristics of the locality of post-earthquake L'Aquila, for example, such as its affective impact on the locals and visitors, the experience of the disaster, destruction, and death, the local meanings ascribed to

particular local practices, the use of the local dialect in many of the protests, are all elements that are not easily grasped when looking at that case from afar or from outside the borders of the area affected by the earthquake. Rhetorical ethnography, participant observation, presence, inhabitation, being and feeling *in situ* are thus fundamental for this case study and for studying emplaced rhetoric of protest in general.

Rhetorical fieldwork specifics

For this analysis, I collected a series of oral histories during several trips to L'Aquila, from 2009 to 2014. Because L'Aquila is my hometown in Abruzzo, establishing connections with the activists and recruiting volunteers for oral histories and interviews was a considerably easier task for me than it could have been for a non-local rhetorical ethnographer. My connection with the place also facilitated my engagement as participant observer in the protest actions. During the four years in which I conducted my study of L'Aquila-based protests, I gathered a collection of recorded conversations with the activists in order to keep track of the evolving local narratives and preoccupations circulating in Abruzzo. I recorded (audio and video), transcribed, and translated several testimonies that the locals voluntarily shared with me. Over time, I built a multimedia archive (on Scalar.usc.edu) that includes different kinds of texts retrieved in L'Aquila (pamphlets, fliers, banners, pictures, videos, documentaries, movies, books, online testimonies, local news files). These materials, which I consider the outcome of my «rhetorical fieldwork» in L'Aquila, have been fundamental for drafting this manuscript. My collection of interviews and oral histories are from a group of roughly 30 activists from different citizens' committees and different demographic groups. The age range of the activists I interviewed spans from 25 to 65 years of age; roughly 60% percent of the interviewees were male and the remaining 40% were female; some of them were professionals (professors, journalists, surgeons, engineers) others were precarious workers or unemployed; finally, the activists described themselves as having different political affiliations, ranging from the extreme left to the conservative right. This group included some of the most engaged local activists and some partially active ones. As such, this is not meant to be a representative sample of the larger population of evacuees residing in L'Aquila. All the testimonies utilized for this essay were voluntarily shared with me, and all the oral histories were collected through in depth, non-structured interviews that lasted approximately between one and two hours each. Finally, I anonymized all the testimonies to respect the privacy of the activists, some of whom are withstanding trials and prosecution related to the protest events occurred between 2010-11.

Rhetorical ethnography and participant observation represent useful «rhetorical field methods» (Middleton and Senda-Cook, 2011) that scholars can use «to analyze situations in which meanings depend on places, physical structures, spatial delineations, interactive bodies, and in-the-moment choices» (*ibidem*). Rai also reinforces the potential of the ethnographic genre for rhetoric scholarship by describing it as a mode of recording «rhetoric doing work in the world that captures the intensely situational and kairotic forces that are generated when symbols interact with the particularities that exist in concrete places and times» (Rai, 2015). Participant observation and ethnographic work, in conclusion, can productively contribute in deepening the understanding of the dimension of locality and in this context they serve to enrich my rhetorical analysis through interdisciplinary fieldwork.

The next section is an account of two of the most significant protest actions of post-earthquake activism. In the following rhetorical-ethnographic account of post-earthquake protest rhetoric during the 2009 G8 in L'Aquila, I tell the story of those protests giving voice to the Aquilani activists, contextualizing and pinpointing their perspectives trough a reading of the broader coverage of those mobilizations, and reflecting on their local impact on the reconstruction politics and on the communal life of the Aquilani.

3.   Post-earthquake protests during the 2009 G8 in L'Aquila: «Yes We Camp!» and «The Last Ladies»

Two days after the earthquake, as firefighters dug the bodies of missing people out of the rubble and the death toll was rising every hour, Silvio Berlusconi told the survivors of the earthquake to lift their spirits and think about the accommodation in the tent cities as a «weekend of camping»[9]. Unsurprisingly, this statement did not resonate well with the thousands of people who were forced out of their wrecked homes and were mourning the loss of their friends and family. Journalists reported disappointed survivors' comments, such this one from *The Times* online: «If Berlusconi thinks we are all on a camping holiday, I invite him to do a swap»[10] said Vincenzo Breglia, as he stood outside his tent on a sports field on the outskirts of L'Aquila. «He

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[9] See: Hooper, J., «Berlusconi: Italy earthquake victims should view experience as camping weekend», *The Guardian*, April 8, 2009 (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/08/italy-earthquake-berlusconi) and «Near Tents and Ruins, G-8 Summit Meeting Opens», *NYTimes.com*, March 8, 2013 (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/world/europe/09italy.html?scp=3&sq=&st=nyt&_r=0).

[10] See: «Silvio Berlusconi Tells Earthquake Survivors to Head for the Beach», *Times Online*, http://archive.today/v1BO3, accessed June 19, 2014.

can come here to sleep and I will be Prime Minister. Let's see how he likes spending the night in freezing temperatures with no hot water» (*ibidem*).

Three months after the beginning of the Aquilani's forced «camping holiday», and during the organization of the G8 in L'Aquila, 50,403 evacuees were still living in temporary accommodations. According to the «Report of the Assisted Population» released by the Structure for the Management of the Emergencies (in Italian SGE) on June 30, 2009, there were 20,011 people residing in the tent cities, 19,749 in hotels on the Abruzzo coast, and 9,643 staying in «autonomous accommodations» or as guests of relatives[11]. During this period, there was a frenzied atmosphere in L'Aquila because the city was undergoing preparations for the upcoming G8 Summit in the midst of the post-catastrophe emergency.

In order to organize a show of international solidarity, Berlusconi decided to move the gathering from La Maddalena to L'Aquila. Allegedly, Berlusconi arranged this change to avoid wasting the millions of Euros allotted for the G8 preparations in La Maddalena by investing them instead in the devastated territory. Berlusconi declared: «It's a big effort. We would like to be dressed up in one's Sunday best, but they will find us in overalls»[12]. He also stated that he was sure that the No-Global movements «will not dare to come here and protest heavily; they won't have the heart to hit a land that is already severely devastated by the earthquake»[13]. This decision drew conflicting feelings from those in L'Aquila. Many people welcomed the idea because of the visibility and attention that the G8 Summit could attract to L'Aquila's catastrophic situation. However, others considered Berlusconi's decision a strategic move to internationally promote the media spectacle of the «miraculous recovery of L'Aquila» that he had already started promoting through national media. According to the critics, the decision also marked a strategic opportunity for the government to keep G8 protestors under stricter surveillance by holding the G8 in that particular locale.

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[11] For detailed data about the assisted populace after the earthquake: «Situazione della popolazione post-sisma – commissario delegato per la ricostruzione in Abruzzo», http://www.commissari-operlaricostruzione.it/Informare/Situazione-della-popolazione-post-sisma, accessed June 19, 2014.

[12] «L'Aquila, Berlusconi: "Spostato qui il G8". Ok da Obama e Brown», http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/laquila-berlusconi-spostato-qui-g8-ok-obama-e-brown.html, accessed June 19, 2014.

[13] «Il governo sposta il G8 all'Aquila. Sì di Londra e Washington», *Repubblica.it*, http://www.repubblica.it/2009/04/sezioni/esteri/g8-vertice/g8-aquila/g8-aquila.html, accessed June 19, 2014.

«Yes We Camp!»

In this controversial context, on July 8, 2009, 50 activists from the network of the citizens' committees drove to the Roio mountainside from their «media headquarters» (a public Internet point in a removable wooden house inside an occupied UNICEF Park) determined to enact a peaceful and strategic protest to connect with national and international publics. As Barack Obama and the other world leaders landed in L'Aquila, the activists gathered to catch their attention and that of the thousands of journalists stationed in the G8 media headquarters in L'Aquila. The activists placed huge letters that read «YES WE CAMP!» in a position on the mountainside that could not be missed by anyone staying at the Guardia di Finanza, the military compound where the G8 meeting was taking place[14].

Figure 1. «Yes We Camp!» L'Aquila, 2009 (photo by www.blogs.reuters.com)

The activists designed the slogan «Yes We Camp!» as a parody of Obama's campaign motto «Yes We Can!» to attract international attention to the situation of the Aquilani that the government had carefully kept out of public visibility in those days. For example, as the world leaders were escorted to the Finanza Compound in L'Aquila, the fenced tent camps in which the evacuees were residing at the time had

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[14] For a video account of the protest see Alberto Puliafito's documentary: *Yes We Camp – The other G8 – L'Aquila* (2009).

been covered up with huge panels making it impossible for the passersby to see the camps, thereby making the Aquilani invisible to the leaders and to anyone arriving in town for the G8. The Aquilani evacuees and their situation, according to the activists, were being «erased»[15], while the luxurious apartments of the world leaders in the Finanza Compound and the G8 proceedings monopolized media attention.

In this context, a group of photographers, documentary filmmakers, and freelance reporters went with the activists to the mountainside to film the Aquilani counter-spectacle while banners, pins, and flyers with the same slogan appeared all over L'Aquila.

Figure 2. «Yes We Camp!», facing the Finanza Compound (photo by www.terraproject.net)

In an interview during the protest, Marco S., one of the protestors, described the perspective of the activists on the G8 in L'Aquila during the period of emergency in these terms:

> The G8 is just another, the latest governmental media showcase. We are exploiting it, like the Italian government is exploiting it. Having the G8 here is a wrong decision. Our territory is devastated. People here do not have homes to go back to.

[15] A. T., 2009.

The Aquilani won't even be able to follow this G8 event on tv. «Yes We Camp!» is a complaint. We are picking up Obama's famous campaign motto «Yes We Can», and we want everyone to understand that after three months since the earthquake we are still living in tent camps. This has never happened in any previous Italian earthquake. We want the big world leaders, and everyone that will see our protest, to understand that things here in L'Aquila are not going as well as the media portray them on television. We're not all happy. Very few have been able to re-start their lives. Most are still in the tent camps and they do not know if they have a job. Many already know that they lost their job. We do not have any certainty, not even one, to start rebuilding our lives («Yes We Camp!», 2011).

In his description, Marco clearly explained how the perspective of the activists was deeply rooted in the particular experience, moment, and place defined by life in post-earthquake L'Aquila. He also specified that the activists' parodic use of Obama's motto on the Roio mountainside was a strategic way to create a connection between the world of the G8 leaders, and that of the local residents. At the same time, with that slogan, the Aquilani also intended to highlight the clash of two parallel «realities» colliding there and then in the locality of L'Aquila – the one of the evacuees, and that of the powerful world leaders. The activists exploited the mass media coverage of the G8 to provide a different representation of L'Aquila during the G8 Summit, and specifically one that would give visibility to their traumatic experience in that period.

The protestors designed «Yes We Camp!» to hijack Berlusconi's rhetoric of the miraculous recovery of L'Aquila and to contest the G8 that was happening just one mile away from the closest tent camp, where the evacuees were struggling daily to re-organize and restart their lives. Thus, the «Yes We Camp!» counter-spectacle meant to expose the local experience of the Aquilani. It foregrounded both the highly-surveilled, government-subsidized «camping» and the material destruction of the territory against the media and institutional portrayals of the miraculous recovery. Through this protest action, the activists materialized, performed, and made visible their own «reality» and contested the «erasure» of the local residents' experiences during the G8 event and in the period of the post-earthquake emergency. This particular protest employs a public modality of engagement that exemplifies «rhetoric in-action that foregrounds the relationship among power, agencies, materiality, ideologies, and contexts» (Rai, 2015). The rhetorical engagement with the locality and the interaction between symbolic and material forces at play during this protest contributed to subverting the meaning of Obama's motto through the mobilization of the experience of the earthquake. That protest, thus, shows the potential of rhetorical dynamics that mobilize the local context for citizenship engagement and processes of social resistance. Furthermore, thinking about these modes of engagement through the locality approach highlights

their potential to bring forth social and political change. For example, if we look closer at the «Yes We Camp!» protest and at the effects that it generated in the public sphere, we can assess its impact in the context of post-earthquake L'Aquila. On the day of the G8 counter-spectacle, the activists wore T-shirts with the slogan «Forti e Gentili Sì, Fessi No», meaning «Strong and Kind Yes, Dumb No», that grew in popularity after the protest. The activists designed those T-shirts to respond to politicians who had praised the Aquilani people as «strong and kind» and expressing the respect they had for how those people coped with the disaster. The citizens-activists found this statement disingenuous because, while publically praising the Aquilani people, those politicians were treating them differently in terms of tax breaks during the emergency. The state taxes in L'Aquila were initially only suspended, and a total repayment with the accumulated interests was expected to be reimbursed in installments distributed in 24 months after the end of the state of the emergency.

Figure 3. «Forti e Gentili» t-shirt, G8 protests (photo by terraproject.net)

Comparing their fiscal situation of «temporary tax suspension» to the treatment received by the people from Irpinia and Umbria, where other emergencies happened in the past, the Aquilani realized that the government was adopting a very different fiscal approach in managing L'Aquila's emergency. In the cases of Umbria and Irpinia, in effect, the evacuees received a 40% state tax break during the emergency period, with the remaining 60% to be reimbursed to the state in installments after the end of the state of emergency and over the course of ten years, with no in-

terests added[16]. Therefore, in order to demand equal fiscal relief, the activists wanted to convey the idea that people from L'Aquila might indeed be «strong and kind» – and very resilient – surviving in the precarious conditions of camping for months, and under the strict surveillance of the CPA. However, they wanted to make it clear that they were not «dumb» enough to be deceived by an unfair fiscal treatment. The «Strong & Kind Yes, Dumb No» T-shirts that were launched during the «Yes We Camp!» demonstration became a must-wear for the Aquilani advocating for the improvement of the local economy and the rebirth of L'Aquila. Since the «Yes We Camp!» protest, the taxation problem became one of the issues discussed consistently during the citizens' assemblies, and one of the catalysts for some of the other major protest rallies organized by the Aquilani in the next couple of years, such as the rallies in Rome in July 2010 and the occupation of the L'Aquila-Roma highway[17].

Overall, the activists considered the «Yes We Camp!» counter-spectacle successful, as news reports covered it at a national as well at an international level. By early evening, even *The New York Times* reported the protest and interviewed one of the activists (Padovani, 2010: 431). As the Aquilani activists constituted themselves as an active counterpublic, the first period of mobilizations was characterized by spectacular modalities of protest that sought to attract attention and public visibility after a period of denied citizenship. The activists recognized the media screens (DeLuca, 1999) «as the contemporary shape of the public sphere, and the image event designed for mass media dissemination as an important contemporary form of citizen participation» (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). They endeavored to instrumentalize the mainstream media in order to re-appropriate their citizenship, as they lucidly state in the interviews discussing the «Yes We Camp!» provocation. They managed to make strategic use of the mass media coverage of the G8, and they also realized that they could disseminate those images themselves, via alternative media outlets. This specific protest action, and its dissemination in the local and national public screens, mobilized a much larger base of citizens by opening up the conversation about fair taxation and fiscal relief for L'Aquila, the local socio-economical emergency, and the future reconstruction.

Ultimately, after two years of protests in L'Aquila and in Rome and the public conversations that those protests generated by reframing the Aquilani issues

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[16] «A Roma la rabbia dei terremotati. "Ci sentiamo umiliati e traditi"», *Repubblica.it*, http://www.repubblica.it/2009/05/sezioni/cronaca/sisma-aquila-11/proteste-parlamento/proteste-parlamento.html, accessed June 19, 2014.

[17] Those two rallies generated national public attention and were widely covered by mainstream national media. Those protests also focused public and political attention on the requests of the Aquilani, thus opening up the discursive space for the political negotiations of post-disaster taxation and reconstruction policies in the public and technical spheres.

as national political problems, the government agreed to reconsider the taxation plan. The Berlusconi government approved a new plan that granted the Aquilani the same fiscal treatment that had been applied to previous situations of emergency in Italy. This was a hard-won accomplishment for the Aquilani activists, and it came after several assemblies, protests, rallies, and interventions.

«The Last Ladies»

«Yes We Camp!» was not the only counter-spectacle in the days of the G8. Parallel protests and events were organized to enhance local public visibility and support the No-G8 march. The citizens' committees, for instance, also organized «The Last Ladies March» and «L'Aquila Social Forums». «The Last Ladies March» was the counter-spectacle to the G8 event in which the First Ladies of world leaders were treated to a guided tour of the red zone in downtown L'Aquila. The First Ladies' tour even included a mechanized earthquake simulator, making L'Aquila's disaster zone something of a tourist attraction complete with a thrill ride.

The march aimed to highlight the gap between the attention granted by the Italian government to the First Ladies, hosted in anti-seismic residences and escorted in the red zone, and the women of L'Aquila who had lost everything and had been living in tents for months, and were prohibited to enter in their own houses in the red zone. The women activists marched chanting slogans in Italian and in Aquilano dialect such as «Michele, Carla, venite nelle tende! Le donne Abruzzesi vi aspettano in mutande!» meaning «Michele (Obama), Carla (Sarkozy), come to our tents! The Abruzzo women are waiting for you in their underwear!»

Figures 4–5. The First Ladies touring downtown L'Aquila and experiencing the L'Aquila earthquake-simulator (photos by www.protezionecivile.org)

Figure 6. «The Last Ladies», 2009 G8 protests (photos by www.ilmessaggero.it)

Many marched in their underwear to symbolize that L'Aquila citizens had been stripped of everything (Padovani, 2010). Protestors also carried the plastic food trays that were used to distribute the meals to the Aquilani in the tent camps to signify, in the words of citizen-activist Sara:

> A plastic tray to symbolize that we do not want to be fed, or «managed». We want autonomy, meaning that we would like to finally go back to a real form of housing. There are empty, immediately available unoccupied houses in L'Aquila. This morning we symbolically broke into and occupied one of these houses that have not been damaged by the earthquake. There are alternative solutions to that of keeping us in tent camps for months, deprived of privacy and independence. There are alternatives to the construction of permanent houses in cement, which will devastate our environment, the urban tissue, and the social fabric of our town («Yes We Camp!» and «The Last Ladies», 2009).

Sara's words echoed a widely shared preoccupation of the Aquilani with the politics of reconstruction that the government adopted in order to resolve the housing emergency in Abruzzo. The Berlusconi government decided to build anti-seismic «new-towns», called «Progetto C.A.S.E.»[18]. in the outskirts of L'Aquila, a series of brand-new and permanent housing complexes to host the evacuees. This decision preoccupied the Aquilani, who advocated instead for a reconstruction of the old town and its city center, and favored instead the assemblage of cheaper, more sustainable, and removable housing options to use temporarily. They opposed the construction

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[18] Also an acronym for «Complessi Antisismici Sostenibili Eco-compatibili», meaning «Anti-seismic Sustainable and Eco-compatible Complexes».

of the extremely expensive[19] and invasive new-towns in particular, because they believed that the «Progetto C.A.S.E.» would cause a «landscape ruin»[20] around L'Aquila, and the creation of «dorm-neighborhoods»[21] that lacked integration with the urban tissue of the town that the Aquilani hoped to see rebuilt for the future.

The «Last Ladies March», similarly to the «Yes We Camp!» action, represented the beginning of the discussions about alternative housing solutions and a «participated and transparent reconstruction»[22] that generated other protests in the red zone, such as the «People of the Wheelbarrows» and the national rally «L'Aquila calls Italy – Rubbles of Democracy». Overall, these further rallies contributed to shatter Berlusconi's narrative of the miraculous recovery, and to begin a process of social and material reconstruction[23]. As of today, the Aquilani activists believe that these rallies represented «the first steps in order to start a path of real recovery, less miraculous perhaps, but supported by the rest of Italy and by the participation of the citizens of L'Aquila»[24].

4.   Conclusion: Towards a material and social re-construction

In conclusion, it is worth noting that this account of the «Yes We Camp!» and «The Last Ladies» protests is consistent with the research findings of existing studies about post-quake activism in L'Aquila (Farinosi and Micalizzi, 2013; Farinosi and Treré, 2011, 2014; Padovani, 2010; Pietrucci, 2011). All the research studies conducted in L'Aquila reveal two recurring themes in the post-quake mobilizations: the local citizens' need for public inclusion and public visibility in the post-earthquake political discourse, and the Aquilani's desire to rectify the representations of the post-disaster situation circulating in the mainstream media. The Aquilani activists – in their testimonies – remember that in the period of emergency they quickly realized

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[19] The CPA statistics assessed that «Project C.A.S.E.» costed the government an average of 2,700 Euros per square meter, an exceptionally high cost for the location and the type of housing realized.

[20] A. C., 2012.

[21] A. C., S. V., A. T., 2012.

[22] G.P., 2013.

[23] This study, consistent with the genre of rhetorical ethnography is a conceptually grounded, interpretive account of specific discursive performances (L'Aquila post-quake protests). As such, its claims are of a strictly qualitative nature and the resulting analysis provides an account of the rhetorical impact of the discursive dynamics circulating in the public and technical spheres after the L'Aquila earthquake. Accordingly, this study aims to establish and highlight the connections between protest rhetoric and contemporary democratic life in post-earthquake L'Aquila.

[24] A. C., S. V., 2013.

that it was necessary to «perforate Berlusconi's media spectacle»[25] and to «break the semantic glass» (Padovani, 2010: 420) that had descended over the city after the earthquake. In order to do so, they recognized the importance of making their own representations of their local reality visible to national and international audiences, as a counterpoint to the coverage of the earthquake as a «media spectacle of catastrophe» (Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz, 2010; Dayan and Katz, 1992). The «Yes We Camp!» and «The Last Ladies» protest actions analyzed in this essay show that they succeeded in finding creative modes to articulate and disseminate their local perspective, using both emplaced/embodied modalities of protest, and online activism.

This case study reveals that the activists were determined to create a counter-discourse to illustrate their perspectives and voice their opinions about the future of their city. As they lucidly stated in their oral histories, for them, appropriate strategies for regaining public visibility in the post-earthquake discourse were those aiming to re-appropriate or re-invent new spaces for public aggregation, or those using the earthquake devastation instrumentally for making statements about the possibilities of recovery of L'Aquila. In the words of one of the Citizen's Committee 3e32[26] activists:

> In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake we were facing a situation… a moment in which we finally had to face some serious choices – to decide what to do for the future, because everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch, and so we had the possibility to re-write the meanings of many things (Traini and Vergari, 2014).

With the goal of promoting public inclusion in local politics, after the «Yes We Camp!» and related G8 protest actions, the Aquilani activists of the local citizens committees engaged in a series of cross-partisan, grassroots mobilizations that employed modalities of civic engagement and mobilization similar to the ones described in this study: they occupied abandoned buildings and transformed them into civic-cultural centers; they occupied the highway that connects Rome to L'Aquila to protest the delays in the reconstruction and the politics of the emergency management; they collectively broke into the red zone and re-appropriated their public agora, where they established a permanent tent for hosting public assemblies to brainstorm, re-think, and reorganize their civic life; they also pushed for sustainable options in the reconstruction practices, and considered the massive need for material reconstruction

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[25] A. T., 2010.
[26] The Citizens' Committee «3e32» was, and still is one of the most active groups of activists in L'Aquila.

as an «opportunity»[27] to re-imagine L'Aquila as a better, safer, and more sustainable place to rebuild for future generations.

In conclusion, by exposing the contradictions and difficulties that characterized the experience of living in the seismic crater, and by re-telling their stories in the post-quake emergency by focusing on the possibilities for the future reconstruction, the Aquilani «re-wrote the meanings» that were ascribed to their situation by the mainstream media and the Berlusconi government and «broke the semantic glass» that was negatively affecting the local politics of the reconstruction and that portrayed the local situation as «a miracle» realized.

By creatively leveraging their local interpretation of the post-earthquake situation to hijack the institutional and mainstream media representations of post-earthquake L'Aquila, the activists were able to re-inscribe their own meanings to their experience of the earthquake, ultimately disseminating the local perspective on the reality of life in the seismic crater, and managing to contribute to the dialogue about the reconstruction of both the material town and the sense of community that had been damaged by the earthquake.

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