

Duygu Erbil and Clara Vlessing

Activist Afterlives

1 Introduction

Since 2012, the London-based radical publishers Pluto Press have released eighteen short biographies in their “Revolutionary Lives” series. Covering figures from Frantz Fanon to Salvador Allende, Sylvia Pankhurst to Leila Khaled, the series crosses vectors of cause, gender, race, nationality, and era to assemble an effective canon of historic radicals. Its selection belies a series of decisions about whose lives can be deemed ‘revolutionary’ and whose are memorable or, more critically, worthy of remembrance. Taking these works as carriers of cultural memory, the question that persists is: how did this individual’s life become iconic, worthy of celebration or condemnation, or a source of inspiration for the future? In each of these cases, Pluto’s commissioning and publication of a short biography builds on previous work on these individuals. Lives are not intrinsically memorable but become so through the hard work of later subjects who create and circulate stories, recognizing and elaborating on their actions and making them recognizable figures to larger publics. And while evidently, the ways in which people live their lives determine the extent to which we deem them memorable, social and cultural values – which change over time and across contexts – also play an essential role in identifying *some* lives as more deserving of attention than others. As Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen suggest, “canonicity is not merely a matter of which books are kept on bookshelves but also a matter of the way people give shape to their collective identities and allegiances in a public way” (2014, 5). The same can be said for lives: the celebration of an individual life is never only about an individual: lives are always relationally narrated and gain social meaning through acts of storying.

At first sight, the consecration of an individual life as representative of collective aspirations seems at odds with the pluralistic and democratic values of cultural memory studies. After all, we have come a long way since the ‘great men’ theory of history. Yet, many individuals who do not closely resemble Napoleon or Churchill also gain iconic status and become intensely memorable when they live on in stories. Just like historical events that become common reference points in cultural memory, individual lives enter stories as collectively recognizable reference points with distinct dynamics from the remembrance of a collective or an event. In “Embodied and Remembered Lives,” Rigney suggests that we can study these lives as “‘memory sites’ (Nora) or ‘figures of memory’ (Assmann), which are considered particularly representative of the past, or more specifically, of that part of the past that is worth remembering” (2009, 65). Just like any other “mem-

ory site,” however, the reasons for this memorability reside in the “dynamics of remembrance” (Rigney 2008a): “It is not enough for individuals to have done something ‘glorious’ to be remembered, then, there has to be ‘room’ in the canon of memory sites for them” (Rigney 2009, 65). Acts of cultural remembrance, or sustained mediation and remediation of narratives, make room for these figures in the canon of memory sites. Afterlives of individuals are generated by the lives of many different sorts of media.

2 Activist lives

As a response to the field’s growing interest in the relationship between memory and activism, we would like to suggest that *activist* afterlives come with a particular set of questions and concerns. As opposed to the silenced victim, there is often no clear moral imperative to remember them. And unlike the all-powerful character of the national hero, their remembrance does not necessarily serve the *status quo*. Activists are characterized by their agency and oppositionality. They are suppressed or challenged but find means and mechanisms to push back against more powerful actors and institutions.

Many activist lives hold a place in the ‘canon of memory sites’ or at least became carriers of contentious memories and political aspirations, giving a face to entire movements. Some leaders continued to ‘lead’ successive generations as they lived on in stories, like Martin Luther King or Che Guevara. Some victims of injustice and systemic violence came to give a name to a *cause célèbre*, like Alfred Dreyfus or George Floyd, whose experience gave impetus to justice-seeking collectives. Some activists were both movement leaders and victims of injustice, like Angela Davis – an icon for many intersecting movements. Some were remembered because memory activists insisted that the injustice these figures experienced must not be forgotten. And some were remembered in all their glory and charisma, with a focus on the strength and importance of their political vision, personifying the memory of activism to inspire new generations to keep fighting for a cause. Depending on the lives that were remembered, there were of course different mixtures of these many modes of remembrance. But across all these figures’ afterlives, we see how the nexus of memory and activism crystallizes around individual figures, pointing to a gravitational pull towards giving a face to political causes.

This pattern is not without its complications and we may find ourselves wondering: what is lost and gained when an individual life comes to stand for a cause? Often, a tension arises between the egalitarian or collectivist aims of the

social movements and the emergence of individual figureheads. This tension is heightened by the activities of journalistic forms of media, with a vested interest in producing recognizable and charismatic leaders to act as focal points for attitudes towards a given movement. Davis, to use an example from our collection on *Remembering Contentious Lives* (Erbil et al. 2025), has expressed discomfort at the process of individualization whereby she has come to be remembered as one of the most well-known figures of the Black Power movement and a byword for the radicalism of the American 1970s. Yet she also acknowledges that her life, in storied forms such as in her famous autobiography, represents the “aspirations of millions of people” (Davis 2021). Narrativization, therefore, plays an essential role in the processes by which activist lives are mediated and remediated to become carriers for collective aspirations: “storied lives are seen both by the people involved and by the people around them as part and parcel of *collective* stories extending beyond the range of a single embodied life” (Rigney 2009, 61). Telling and retelling lives in narrative form gives them set meanings and associations, helping to form an image of a cohesive and characterizable self.

3 Remembering a contentious life

The relationship between cultural memory and activist lives is manifold and, as the examples above indicate, covers multiple points on the “memory-activism nexus” (Rigney 2018a, 372). Look at the case of the French anarchist Louise Michel (1830–1905), who over the course of a varied and extraordinary life fought for the liberation of the working class, of women, colonized subjects, children and animals, becoming one of the most recognizable actors from the 1871 Paris Commune.

Michel’s cultural memory has been produced through successive mediations and remediations, which began during her lifetime. In an act that could be described as “memory activism,” in that a contentious subject seeks to shape the legacy of political activism, Michel played a pivotal part in the storying of her own life. Versions of her memoirs have been in circulation since they were first written and published in the late nineteenth century. Acting as a “portable monument” (Rigney 2004), the text stands as testimony to Michel’s lifelong radicalism and struggle against capitalism, militarism, patriarchy and nationalism. The memoirs give shape and resonance to Michel’s life, portraying a knowable character with a clear voice and ideological commitment. Subsequently, the remediation of Michel’s life story across film, fiction, archival collections, and more, provides a memory of her life that generates connections between the nineteenth century past and shifting presents. Among these mediations are those that re-

member Michel's life *in* activism. In 2020, the name 'Louise Michel' adorned a huge ship, sponsored by the famous artist Banksy, that rescued refugees in the Mediterranean. Exalted as "the perfect encapsulation of what we [the ship's crew] believe" (Cowles 2020), Louise Michel could be seen to offer a "blueprint for the future lives of those who identify with [her] as part of a common story" (Rigney 2009, 66). As later activists use and adapt her story, Michel's life is associated with new causes.

Michel's case also gives some sense of the relational nature of activist afterlives. The individual subject or group who recalls and records a life draws from available schemata to make sense of it. Thus, Michel's afterlives are contoured both by the specific narrative put forth in her memoirs and by more general stories, tropes or characterizations available to remembering subjects. She is, for instance, often compared to Joan of Arc, as a readily available prototype of female resistance. Moreover, those remembering a life do so intersubjectively in that they draw from relationally constituted experiences. The nature of the stories they produced are always affected by the venues, conventions or audiences these remembering subjects anticipate and researching activist afterlives is as much about *who* is remembering an activist's life – to what end? and why? – as it is about the subject who is remembered.

The centrality of context to the remembrance of an individual's work, is evident even in the volume you are holding in your hands (or reading on your screen) right now, which contributes to the story of Ann Rigney's academic life. If we, Duygu and Clara, were to tell anecdotes about our everyday encounters or festive dinners with Ann – who we might even call by her first name! – we would provide a more intimate representation of her in our personal lives, rather than a canonical citation in our academic work. If we were to write about our past lives as master's students at Utrecht University, she would appear as an inspiring teacher. If this was a cover letter for a job application, she would figure as our previous boss. Different meanings of 'Ann Rigney' would come forward depending on which story we chose to tell. The multifaceted lives of both remembering and remembered subjects affect the mediation of lives into stories and, if there is 'room' in the canon, into "figures of memory" or "memory sites." The field of memory studies is yet to map out the dynamics of the making of memorable lives, especially in the context of activism. Scholarship on life writing and autobiography studies may provide a good starting point.