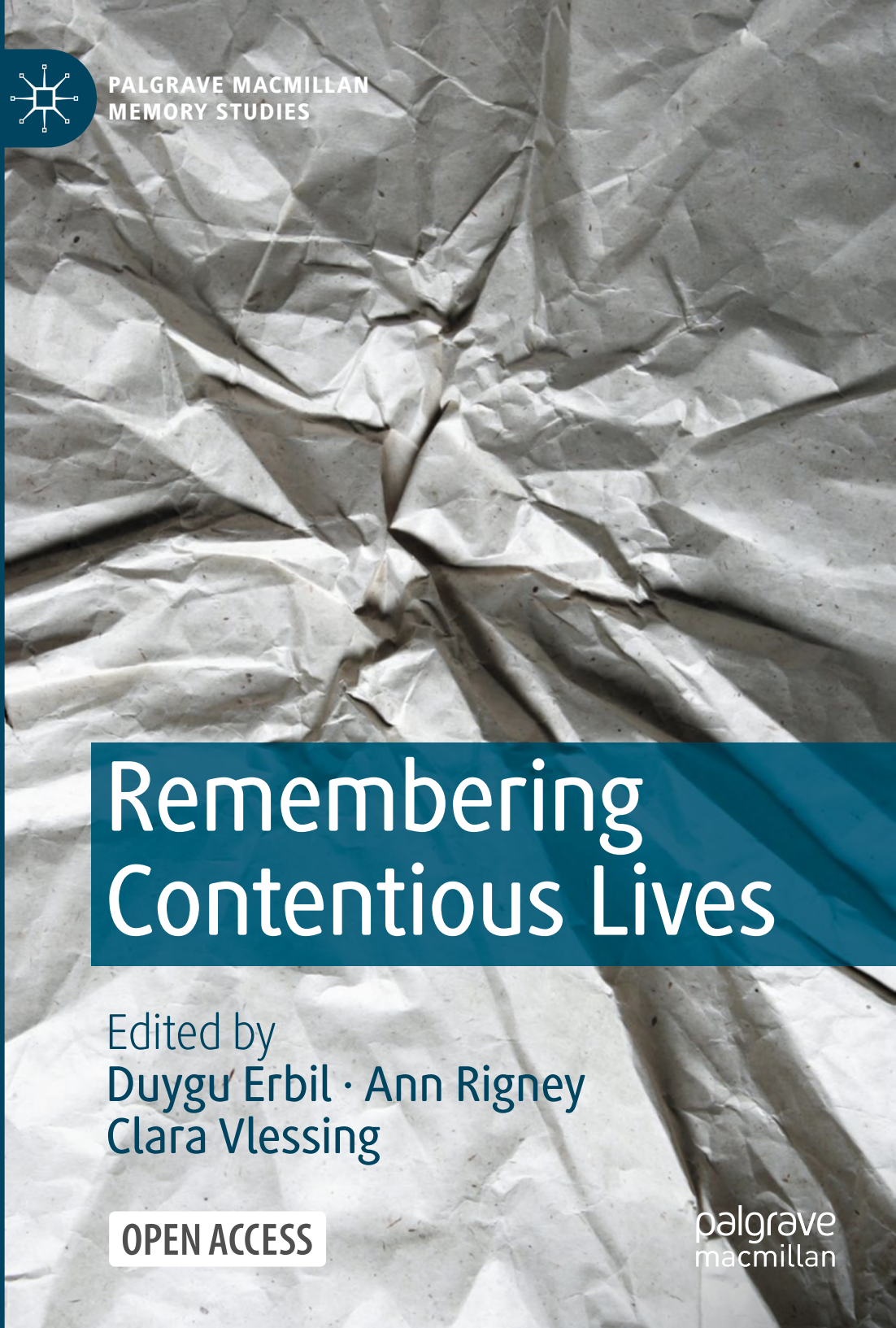
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
MEMORY STUDIES
Remembering
Contentious Lives
Edited by
Duygu Erbil · Ann Rigney
Clara Vlessing
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Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies

The nascent field of Memory Studies emerges from contemporary trends that include a shift from concern with historical knowledge of events to that of memory, from 'what we know' to 'how we remember it'; changes in generational memory; the rapid advance of technologies of memory; panics over declining powers of memory, which mirror our fascination with the possibilities of memory enhancement; and the development of trauma narratives in reshaping the past. These factors have contributed to an intensification of public discourses on our past over the last thirty years. Technological, political, interpersonal, social and cultural shifts affect what, how and why people and societies remember and forget. This groundbreaking series tackles questions such as: What is 'memory' under these conditions? What are its prospects, and also the prospects for its interdisciplinary and systematic study? What are the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for its investigation and illumination?

Duygu Erbil • Ann Rigney
Clara Vlessing
Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Duygu Erbil, Ann Rigney, and Clara Vlessing

In the preface to the third edition of her autobiography, originally published in 1974, Angela Davis (2022) reflected on what it meant for her to write about her own life:

> At the time I wrote this book, I could not really imagine myself as an author, especially of an autobiography. Almost a half century later, I have retained my suspicion of the underlying individualism that defines the genre. Today, as we witness the perilous repercussions of neoliberal individualism, I am more convinced than ever that we need to engage in relentless critique of our centering of the individual. As was the case fifty years ago, I believe that if we fail to emphasize how our lives are precisely produced at the many junctions of the social and the individual, we fundamentally distort the ways we live and struggle in community with one another and with our nonhuman companions on this planet.

While some of Davis's concerns here reflect current issues—such as women's rights and climate change—her latest preface is consistent with earlier editions in the discomfort she expresses with autobiography as a genre. It brings the risk of individualism, she ponders, in a world that

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needs intersectional solidarity and a broader sense of community. Putting her own life centre stage seems at odds, moreover, with the belief that her significance was not because of her individuality but because of the collective values and the collective struggle she stood for.

This sense of discomfort with her own storied life has become something of a leitmotif in Davis's public interventions. In an interview on the occasion of an exhibition called *1 Million Roses for Angela Davis*, organised to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the mass campaign in the former East Germany to have her released from jail in the US, she looked back at the iconic status she had achieved in the 1970s and that she still enjoys today:

> Because I knew that the images of me and who I was and what I had done, produced expectations that far exceeded my capacity as an individual to live up to them. It took me a while to come to the conclusion that, while those images are definitely of me, a younger me, they don't necessarily represent me as an individual. They represent the movement that was generated around me, the demand for my freedom. You know, there was a time, when I felt embarrassed to face those images. I really didn't know how to respond in the presence of those images. Now I'm pretty comfortable, because I recognise that they represent the demands and aspirations of millions of people. (Reinhardt & Wagner, 2020)

These recent quotations from veteran activist Angela Davis bring us straight to the core themes of the present volume. Not only do they show that there is a lively culture of commemoration relating to activism, but more centrally here, they show how activist memory tends to crystallise around individual figures. There seems to be a gravitational pull towards giving a face and name to political causes as struggles are ongoing and, later, when they are being recalled. As commentators have noted with respect to the *1 Million Roses for Angela Davis* campaign (Schubert, 2020), Davis became a figurehead within East Germany for the Black Power movement as well as a charismatic figure in her own right; fifty years later she has become a site of memory for an entire era even as she, passionately speaking in Berlin in 2022 on behalf of refugee rights, continues to engage in new campaigns.[1]

As Davis herself is all too aware, the channelling of the memory of activism through charismatic individual figures sits oddly with the very principle of collective action. This has long been a dilemma for activists

themselves. As Todd Gitlin (1980) shows with respect to student movements in the 1960s, they struggled to maintain their self-identify as a 'leaderless movement' while also gaining the attention of the media who insisted on having recognisable, photogenic spokespersons. Davis acknowledges this tension, while also suggesting that her life, once it was turned into a story, came to represent, not just herself, but "the aspirations of millions of people." This of course begs the question of how singular lives can ever come to 'represent' collective aspirations and stand in for a cause. More specifically, it draws attention to the role of autobiographical writing and self-fashioning in this process. Is life writing irrevocably tied to individualism as Davis suggests? Or can it also succeed, as she simultaneously implies, in doing cultural work that transcends this limitation and makes it a carrier of collective aspirations?

The present collection aims to answer these questions. It belongs to a larger reorientation of memory studies away from its traditional concern with the memory of war to the memory of non-violent struggle (Reading & Katriel, 2015), and from the battlefield to the civic realm of contentious politics (Tilly, 2008). In particular, this collection has emerged from the Remembering Activism project at Utrecht University and belongs to a growing body of research bringing cultural memory scholars and social movement scholars into dialogue around the study of the "memory-activism nexus" (Rigney, 2018). The memory-activism nexus provides a conceptual framework for studying the interplay between memory activism (movements to change collective memory), the memory of activism (the remembrance of earlier movements), and memory in activism (the role of memory in later mobilisations). There is a growing literature with regard to each of these axes of inquiry,[2] while the concept of a memory-activism nexus provides an over-arching framework for studying the interplay between these elements as part of the "dynamics of contention" (McAdam et al., 2001).

In contrast to studies of the memory-activism nexus that have a sociological focus (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019), we approach these issues specifically from the perspective of cultural memory studies. This means research that is focused on culturally mediated memory that is carried in a publicly accessible manner by media of all kinds: texts, speech, images, gestures, music, objects, and all other potential carriers of meaning. Emphasising the role of media and mediation is not to deny the existence of memory embodied in individuals. On the contrary, the narrated lives studied here are often rooted in intensely personal experience, which gives them the

authority to speak for a life. But it does shift the centre of attention from embodied processes to the cultural dynamics whereby memories become shared and publicly accessible as points of common reference. Mediation, we argue, is key to understanding how memory functions across political generations and in contentious politics.

Our title *Remembering Contentious Lives* thus refers in the first instance to the ways in which individual lives are remembered in a mediated form and embodied experience translated into a narrative. Mediation, however, is more than just the backdrop here. The nature and collective significance of mediation in producing shared memories, specifically through life writing, is at the core of our concerns. How exactly are lives translated into stories, and with the help of what repertoire of forms, storytelling techniques, plot models and other narrative schemata? The difference between the mode of biography (writing about someone else's life), the mode of autobiography (writing about oneself), the mode of memoir (writing from a first-person perspective as a witness to specific events) or testimony (bearing witness to injustice) shows how the choice of genre actually "premediates" (Erll, 2007) the contours of the life narrated and sets up different relations between actors. While certain genres provide a framework for representing a life as a whole, others zoom in on particular life experiences. Although some genres entail a first-person or third-person voice, while others are the product of collaboration and use a collective 'we,' all of them mediate between the lives experienced, those remembering them, and those reading about them at a later point in time.

While recognising that narrating individual experiences or storying lives can take other forms, we will be giving preferential treatment to written narratives and the evolving repertoire of life-writing strategies through which individual experience is shaped and made accessible to others in the form of written texts. As Jan Assmann (2006: 77) puts it: "Writing is just one form of transmission and reenactment, albeit a very decisive one." Written texts are able to travel through time and space, acting as "portable monuments" (Rigney, 2004) to historic individuals. The spatial mobility of writing becomes especially important in narrating imprisoned lives, in which writers rely on pen and paper to get their stories out into the world (Kennedy in this volume). The live performance of speech finds new addressees when published as a book (Poletti in this volume), a published memoir can become an archive of consciousness-raising stories to be retold in person (Mousavi in this volume) and some books get rewritten throughout time, forging solidarities across generations (Erbil in this

volume). Equally the practice of writing reframes understandings of contentious lives, allowing us to study a nineteenth-century revolutionary's autobiography alongside its twenty-first-century resonances (Vlessing in this volume). Successive life writing by different members of a collective can help us identify historically specific patterns in remembering a collective past (Baier in this volume). Given the wide affordances of the written word, writing the unwritten past constitutes an urgent form of documentation for political actors (Baker in this volume).

Of course, narrowing the scope in this way excludes the multimodal literacy practices employed in life narratives that do not privilege the written word. While recognising these other practices, in line with insights in the field of life writing studies (see below), we will nevertheless be giving preferential treatment to written narratives and the evolving repertoire of life writing strategies through which individual experience is shaped and made accessible to others in the form of texts. Narrowing the scope in this way allows us to uncover a rich array of cultural forms and autobiographical practices that have yet to receive the attention they deserve in cultural memory studies and social movement studies. Furthermore, our interest in life writing as a *literary* practice, which mediates between memory and activism, also stems from the observation that life narratives are often used as resources by social movement scholars who employ a biographical approach without taking literariness and narrative strategies into account (Marche, 2015). As Guillaume Marche (2015) rightly points out, while life narratives constitute important primary sources for social movement sociology they also pose epistemological and methodological challenges to its scholarship, since they are narrative artefacts requiring literary and rhetorical analysis. By situating life writing in the memory-activism nexus as a particular literary practice, we hope to demonstrate how these texts can be analysed beyond a focus on their biographical content.

Studying the role of life writing in the formation of cultural memory builds a long-needed bridge between memory studies and the contiguous field of life writing studies. Central to the latter field, as we will explain in more detail later, is the role of mediation in constituting personal identities, building relations between actors, and generating different—specifically, political—subjectivities that look both back in time and forward to the future.

As our title indicates, we are specifically interested in the relationship between life writing and contentious politics. This relationship is twofold. In the first place, we study the activist narration of lives as part of a

contemporary, transnational repertoire of contention. As Astrid Erll (2023) has shown with reference to what she calls "literary memory activism," lives that are victims of injustice may be narrated in such a way that they *become* contentious in becoming public. In bearing witness to oppression, such life stories do "activist memory work" (Merrill et al., 2020: 4) by offering a form of resistance, hence their tactical use in campaigns for social justice. In the second place, we examine how the lives of activists are recalled at a later point by themselves and by others, and reflect on what this tells us about the way collective aspirations travel across political generations. Since individual activists may outlast the particular movements with which they are originally associated, their long-term trajectories can also cast new light on earlier movements or generate unexpected connections between past and present. The autobiography written by Angela Davis in 1974, for example, is still available, but in some ways, it has also been overtaken by her later life: active as a communist and defender of Black Power in the 1970s, she reappears as a Black feminist supporting both Black Lives Matter and the refugee movement in 2022, thus forming a ligature that makes visible continuities and transformations across generations.

Offering an original lens on the memory-activism nexus, life writing can provide insight into the shaping of political subjectivities through narrative and in the micropolitics of reading and writing. The essays collected here provide examples of lives that become contentious when remembered and of remembered lives that were contentious from the get-go, as well as combinations of these. Before giving an overview of the different chapters, however, we need to say more about the scholarly frameworks in which they are located.

Mediated Memory: Between Individual and Collective

In a much-referenced article from 1999, Jeffrey Olick identified two competing approaches to the study of collective memory—the 'individualist' and the 'collectivist'—which were divided by two different conceptions of culture. The individualist approach takes culture to be a "subjective category of meanings" located in individual minds while the collectivist approach regards culture as "intersubjective (or even as objective) and as embodied in symbolism and patterns of meaning" (Olick, 1999: 336–337).

Recent works in both cultural psychology (see Wagoner et al., 2020) and in the humanities (see Van Dijck, 2007; Wagoner et al., 2020; Erll & Hirst, 2023) have sought to reconcile divisions between the individualist/subjective and the collectivist/objective approaches, drawing attention to the inherent effects of sociocultural elements on cognitive remembrance. Asking "Is there memory in the head, in the wild?" Amanda Barnier and Andrew Hoskins (2018), for instance, call for ways to reconcile this persistent dichotomy.

In this volume, which is informed by insights from cultural memory studies and written by specialists in cultural analysis, we aim to forge links between these two competing models. We do so by emphasising the intersubjective processes that are inherent in the construction of subjectivities in the individualist approach and by de-emphasising the "objective" status of culture in the collectivist approach. Bridging individual and collective conceptions of memory requires us to understand intersubjective acts of cultural remembrance better and recognise the key role of mediation in producing shareable meanings and affects. It is through the mediation and remediation of content across different media—from oral testimony to complex works of art to public monuments—that memories are shared and may hence become collective (Erll & Rigney, 2009; Erll, 2011). Mediation is understood here both in generative and transactional terms. It is generative in the sense that it entails using media technologies and cultural schemata to make sense of experience in observable cultural expressions. It is transactional in the sense that meaning-making is ultimately also dependent on the input and responses of the audiences engaging with those expressions. Taking cultural expressions as its point of observation, cultural memory research has thus become increasingly attentive to the position of cultural artefacts within broader actor-networks, and their role in engaging the subjectivities of their viewers/readers/users in affective as well as cognitive ways. As cultural memory scholars have shown, writing shapes information and affect in complex ways, drawing on existing traditions of representation while continuously also throwing up new variants. Behind this research is the assumption that memorability is not just a function of the events and experiences remembered but also of the particular ways in which recollection is culturally encoded. Moreover, it works from the supposition that subjectivities, including personal recollections and the sharing of experience with others, are produced in interactions with such mediations.

Against this background, the present volume zooms in on life writing as a particular form of mediation with its own traditions. Life writing is the umbrella term used here to indicate a broad range of narrative genres, including biography, autobiography, memoirs, prison narrative and other testimonial forms, that recollect individual lives from different subject positions using the medium of writing. In a recent collection that looks at the interaction between life narratives and cultural memory, Samira Saramo and Ulla Savolainen (2023: 13) also emphasise that "the borders between the scales of the institutional and the vernacular/everyday, public and private, as well as shared and personal are always permeable and interactional." Since even the most seemingly individualistic form of narrating lives, autobiography, is characterised by a fundamental relationality (see Smith & Watson, 2010; Eakin, 1999; Miller, 1994), scholars have adopted the terms "relational life writing" (Friedman in Smith & Watson, 2010: 278) and "auto/biography" (Stanley, 1992) to refer to the cultural forms of narrating lives "into a 'relational' story" (Smith & Watson, 2010: 256). This emphasis on relationality emerged from feminist scholarship that contested the individualistic conception of selves that marks the patriarchal Western canon. In the following, these terms will be used interchangeably with 'life writing' wherever the relationality of life narratives needs emphasis. It is clear from these discussions that attention to life writing as a mnemonic practice offers a new arena for observing the dialectics between private and public memories.

Despite the well-established understanding that personal, interpersonal and collective memories are entangled, life writing, especially autobiography, is often associated with private realms of remembrance and pitched against the collective. Psychologists and neuroscientists, as well as memory scholars in general, refer to autobiographical memoryas a memory system integral to human cognition that creates "a sense of continuity in our personhood" (Van Dijck, 2007: 3). As José van Dijck (14) contends, however, the term "autobiographical memory" is frequently used to connote individuality in opposition to "cultural memory," which by default came to reflect collectivity. When it serves to perpetuate the dichotomy between private and public memories, the use of the term 'autobiographical memory' risks obscuring the fact that in "autobiographical memory, self meets the social, as personal memories are often articulated by communicating them to others" (3). Instead of employing the relationship between autobiography and memory to differentiate between the individual and the collective modes of remembering, this volume aims to put the "-graph"

[writing] back in autobiography and its related genres by zooming in on life writing as a "cultural practice that seeks a public" (Poletti, 2020: 12).

There is one area in which a conversation between cultural memory studies and life writing studies has been well established, namely in their shared interest in the genre of testimony and, specifically, of Holocaust "egodocuments" (Presser, 1969, in Mascuch et al., 2016), such as Primo Levi's account of his incarceration in *Auschwitz, If This Is a Man* (1947). The study of testimony has been widely used as a lens on the continuum between the private and the public, and the individual and collective. Observations that the latter years of the twentieth century constituted an "era of testimony" or "era of the witness" (Felman & Laub, 1992; Wieviorka, 2006) have provided common ground between cultural memory studies and life writing studies as has their shared interest in questions relating to the witnessing or the representation of trauma. Bringing the two fields together, Rosanne Kennedy's (2014: 54) work on the "affective dimension" of testimony and the "genre of literary testimony" (2021: 893) has thus appeared in academic venues dedicated both to cultural memory and to life writing. Simona Mitroiu also combines life writing and memory studies approaches in her work on East Central Europe and utilises testimony as a bridging concept between the fields (e.g. in 2015, 2023). In the same vein, Leonor Arfuch's *Memory and Autobiography: Explorations at the Limits* (2020) offers a recent conceptualisation of the connection between individual testimony and collective trauma, as people reckon with this through the writing of life stories. In a different vein, Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir's *Representations of Forgetting in Life Writing and Fiction* (2017) thinks through the effects of cultural memory on life writing, asking how stories about the collective past have influenced the telling of individual life stories. Once again the cases relate to traumatic pasts, such as the Holocaust and Franco's dictatorship in Spain. Despite these points of convergence between the two fields, however, there are also differences. In particular, specialists of life writing have criticised scholars in memory studies for emphasising collective stories at the cost of individual lives (see Ignaczak, 2018).

It should be clear by now that there are good reasons for pushing further the cross-field dialogue between cultural memory and life writing studies and for extending this conversation beyond the study of trauma-related testimony, which "forecloses an awareness of alternative modes of remembrance and alternative traditions of recall" (Rigney, 2018: 369). There has traditionally been a strong interest in both fields in advancing

our understanding of the link between cultural work and social change. But, as yet, there have been no studies showing how narrated lives feed into cultural memory by mediating subjectivities and by presenting particular tropes or narrative schemata that become repeated tenets of other individuals' "afterlives" (Rigney, 2012). Much as early studies of memory considered how cultural memory helped foster collective identity—particularly with regard to the nation-state (Nora, 1997)—life writing studies can help in developing a more refined understanding of the ways in which "imaginary communities rely on the protagonist of exemplary biographies or autobiographical testimonies of charismatic iconic figures to define their ideals and describe, often within ethnographic parameters, their collective reality in personal terms" (Mascuch et al., 2016: 36).

Life Writing Studies

At its most general, life writing studies encompasses the study of biography, autobiography, memoir, testimony, and the myriad of other genres that narrate lived experience, which were largely ignored in literary studies as long as "literature" meant above all fiction or poetry (Rak, 2005: 12), leaving life writing, especially in its biographical form, the concern of historiography. Bottom-up or grassroots-focused historiography that looks to tell the stories of marginalised individuals or social groups has been more likely to draw on life writing than supposedly 'neutral' or 'objective' histories focusing on the machinations of the state. As a result, scholarship on life writing has developed a nuanced understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and memory, offering a way out of binaries between subjective memories and objective histories (Traverso, 2023). Moreover, the field—whose strong feminist and literary elements has distinguished it from more traditional studies of biography (Howes, 2017)—explores the role of textual forms and storytelling techniques in life writing, further challenging "the basic assumptions on which history has traditionally rested" (Caine, 2010: 68).

Life writing scholars have been quick to recognise the fact that multiple actors and institutions are involved in the production of written lives, including those who act as "producers, coaxers and consumers" (Plummer, 2003: 21) of a given work and the many letters, diaries, memoirs and so on written by other people that provide archival sources and intertexts for life writers. In this spirit, Liz Stanley uses the term 'auto/biography' with reference to feminist biographers in order to highlight the input of the

narrating subject in writing the lives of others. We should "ask of biography the question of 'who says?' " she argues, because there too the narrator is a "socially-located person who is sexed, raced, classed, aged, to mention no more, and is so every bit as much as an autobiographer" (Stanley, 1992: 7). These approaches make the traditional boundaries between autobiographical and biographical writing more porous, opening the way to study life writing as a relational process. This focus on relationality provides the basis for a fruitful connection between memory studies and auto/biography studies in their common attempt to understand the intersubjective dynamics at play in the production of shared understandings of history. In contemporary scholarship "auto/biography" thus highlights the blurring of traditional genre distinctions and consequently bridges personal and social memories.

As the feminist historian and theorist Joan W. Scott (1992: 25–26) maintains, experience is "constituted relationally … It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience." Hence, the individual subject who remembers a life through writing—be that their own or someone else's—always does so intersubjectively by drawing on relationally constituted experiences and available schemata for making sense of them. Accordingly, the remembering subject does not draw on a sovereign individual memory since their subjectivity is partially constituted through intersubjective acts of remembrance. Life writing scholars call this subject the "autobiographical subject" as it does not predate the scene of narration but is constituted through "autobiographical acts" (Smith & Watson, 2010) including those which, following Stanley, occur indirectly in the writing of biography.

This relational approach also allows for a closer consideration of the role of the reader (or, in the case of oral or audio-visual storytelling, the listener or viewer) who is called upon to bear witness to the life that is being storied. The knowledge about the past that is produced in the interaction between narrator and reader is not a subjective truth that opposes an objective one. As Smith and Watson (2010: 16) put it, "autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life." Following what was said earlier, this model of intersubjective truth also applies to biography because there too the knowledge that is produced is as much dependent on textual strategies that mediate between the narrator and the reader as on verifiable historical evidence.

Life writing scholars have also problematised the concept of 'writing' by drawing attention to the myriad technologies of mediation and media materialities that produce life narratives to "explore subjectivity *and* life" (Poletti, 2020: 14, italics in original; see also Rak, 2004: 2). Current scholarship on autobiography, and life narratives in general, is expanding the meaning of "graphe" [writing] in "auto-bio-graphe" [self-life-writing] to refer to "inscription" at large which includes, for instance, portraying or recording alongside writing (Poletti, 2020: 13). To account for autobiographical discourse production across different media technologies, Anna Poletti (12) thus suggests that "we rethink autobiography as self-life-inscription." Contemporary studies of life narratives or auto/biography are increasingly decentralising print cultures, challenging assumptions about the fundamentality of writing to the narration of lives and developing interdisciplinary methodologies to study it beyond the methods inherited from literary studies (see Douglas & Barnwell, 2019). As mentioned earlier, life narratives do not always come in written and print forms, but when they do, they employ literary techniques and belong to distinct textual cultures that demand literary analysis.

In focusing on the textual practices and narrative positions through which subjectivities are crafted, life writing studies has provided grounds for critically reviewing the traditional link between autobiography or biography and self-contained, unique and exceptional individuals as rooted in imperialist epistemologies and patriarchal thinking (Perkins, 2000; Stanley, 1992). In contrast, counter-hegemonic life writing has received particular attention and come to be viewed as a form of activism itself on the grounds that it challenges such hierarchies using a repertoire of contentious textual practices. Informed as it is by the feminist tradition of examining how the 'political' is implicated in the 'personal' (Smith & Watson, 2010: 205), life writing studies is of particular value for memory studies when it comes to analysing how the remembering of lives is linked to political contention. It is worth noting how Davis in 1974 already sought to overcome the traditional limits of the genre by conceiving the account of her time in prison as a specifically *political* autobiography (Davis, 2022; Davis & Mendieta, 2003).

Life Writing, Memory, Political Contention

Despite the importance of life writing to activism, the "activist turn" in memory studies (Chidgey, 2018, 2023; Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023a) has yet to feed back into detailed studies of how individual lives are remembered as part of the memory-activism nexus. Where social movement studies has addressed the role of memory, it has prioritised collective actors and their mobilisation rather than individuals. To the extent that individual stories have been studied, these are usually aggregated to show more general trends in activist behaviour or attitudes (see Polletta, 2006; Jolly, 2019). As the case of Angela Davis already showed, however, but also that of other iconic figures like Che Guevara (Ziff, 2006), Ghandi (Scalmer, 2011) or Martin Luther King (Polletta & Maresca, 2021), the cultural memory of movements often gravitates towards individual figures, historically, mainly men (Vlessing, 2023). Even in the case of movements based on horizontal principles where the 'people' as a crowd aim to represent themselves rather than be represented by leaders, mediation often goes through individual "figures of memory" (Assmann, 1997 [1992]) that give a face to movements in a non-hierarchical way. Witness the importance of the memory of Mahsa Amini in the Iranian protests of 2022: her life and defiant death have been given meaning as a representation of a broader movement, which it has helped to catalyse, rather than as a unique case. This suggests that mnemonic practices in relation to individuals within social movements are both varied and evolving; and that while there is a gravitation towards capturing collective action through individual figures, this is not always in the mode of celebrating a singular or exceptional subject who stands out from a crowd in the role of moral figurehead or charismatic leader. Rather than focus on the well-studied canon of hyper-iconic figures mentioned above, we have opted here for less-well-known cases so as to bring other variables, and specifically the intersubjective relation between biographer and activist, into play.

Moreover, discussions of resistance and contention, rather than consensus, are central to life writing studies. Life writing scholars have connected the voices of individual actors to the collective remembrance of a movement. In this vein, Margaretta Jolly's *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (2019) uses interviews with participants in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s to debate that movement's meaning in the twenty-first century. Jolly (2019: 5) cites "feminist oral history as a branch of memory

studies that attempts to put the politics of speaking and listening at its centre." Her study shows, moreover, that people outliving the movements in which they were originally active may bear witness to less eventful times of politicisation, resistance and resilience, even deradicalisation and teach us more than the eventful, memorable moments of protest, for example, about the patterns of dissent and consent imprinted across a lifetime.

These considerations have led scholars to consider stories about contentious lives, such as Davis's autobiography, in relation to the social movements whose message they complicate or reinforce. Significantly, if more rarely, life writing scholars have also connected the voices of individual actors to the collective remembrance of a movement. Rather than being merely an 'afterthought' that captures moments that have now become past, auto/biography as mnemonic practice can be seen instead as an extension of contention and hence as a way of pursuing contentious politics in the present. Life writing in the hands of certain actors can be seen as a form of political action (Perkins, 2000; Powell, 2021; Kennedy, Poletti, Mousavi and Erbil in this volume): it uses language to activate both memory and hopes for the future in an intersubjective interplay between the narrator, remembered subject and the reader.

The idea that writing itself can be a contentious act that engages the hearts and minds of readers has long been recognised in literary scholarship. Deviations from literary conventions are considered a feature of texts written from marginalised or oppositional positions and are seen to provide the key to their political impact. In her chapter on life writing in *Resistance Literature* (Harlow, 1987: 120), Barbara Harlow thus argues for distinguishing prison memoirs from "conventional autobiography inasmuch as the narratives are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle." In a similar vein, Margo V. Perkins has argued in *Autobiography as Activism* (Perkins, 2000) that autobiographies by activists such as Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown should be read as *texts* that produce political meaning and affect, rather than as mere resources for reconstructing a history of the Black Power movement. The particular textual strategies they used, Perkins argues, reflected their struggle to gain control: over the historical record, their individual public images as contentious figures and the portrayal of the movement itself that they came to speak on behalf of. These activists' writing, in other words, was not merely a record of their individual experience but also part of their activism itself, constituting what bell hooks (1989) termed "coming to voice."

While "coming to voice" from an oppositional position often entails unsettling the established protocols for presenting esteemed lives, contentious life writing may also draw on the cultural memory of previous political writing in order to align itself with a particular protest tradition. One salient example is the rediscovery, during the civil rights movement, of the abolitionist tradition of antislavery autobiographies by formerly enslaved authors such as Frederick Douglass (Jeffrey, 2008: 9). It was no coincidence that Black Power activists like Angela Davis wrote autobiographies because this positioned them in a long lineage of African American emancipation movements, built on epistemological grounds different from those of conventional biographies about "Western man." Perkins (2000: 34) observes that, like the slave narratives, activist autobiographical writing, especially in the case of Davis and Shakur, meant "*writing for their lives*" (italics in original), writing was "giving legitimacy not only to ideas but also to human beings." In this sense, the memory of the cultural form itself, and not only its content, helps create a collective identity and a historical continuum between movements.[3] American activist autobiography has garnered a lot of scholarly attention in recent years since it resonates with current struggles such as the Black Lives Matter movement and prison abolitionism. But it is by no means an isolated phenomenon—witness the proliferation of autobiographical writing among the 1968 generation in Europe, including Luisa Passerini's experiment in collective narration *Autobiography of a Generation* (1996), focusing on the recollections of a group of 1960s' activists. The book can be seen as an extension of the collectivist spirit that permeated their actions, whilst also offering a critique in hindsight of positions adopted by their earlier selves. The retrospective character of auto/biography means bringing into play a complex temporality in which 'then' and 'now,' past and present selves, become intermeshed in genre-specific ways.

The auto/biographical narration of activists' lives brings together memory, contention and life writing in an obvious way. Less obvious, but no less significant in this context, are narratives about the lives of victims of injustice which are used for activist purposes. As already mentioned, testimony is a form of autobiographical narrative which, although it does not necessarily recall the experiences of people engaged in contention, can nevertheless be used for contentious purposes. In this context, it is worth noting how the rise of human rights discourse in the 1990s happened at the same time as an increase in the production of life narratives (Schaffer & Smith, 2004: 1–5; Whitlock, 2007: 77), and of a discourse that

identified "life narratives as carriers of rights discourse" (Whitlock, 2007: 19; see also Jensen & Jolly, 2014; Kurz, 2015). Indeed, especially from the 1990s onwards, human rights advocates utilised life narratives in many contexts; these range from activism around the treatment of Indonesian "comfort women" (McGregor, 2023: 24) to the transnational Uyghur campaign, which uses personal testimony as part of an established human rights repertoire to gain Western support against the Chinese authorities (Hagan, 2010: 567–568). But as we saw in the case of abolitionism, earlier examples can be found of contentious life writing being used as a cultural and political practice to destabilise hegemonic ideas about what constitutes a human life. As Judith Butler puts it in *Frames of War* (2009: 7), "a life has to be intelligible as a life, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable." Accordingly, life writing does the work of rendering dehumanised lives intelligible by altering the "frames of recognition" (Butler, 2009). As Cynthia Franklin (2023: 8) notes in *Narrating Humanity: Life Writing and Movement Politics from Palestine to Mauna Kea,* "life writing texts can mediate between political movements, theory, and history to make space for freer and more radically inclusive and caring ways of being human." In such cases, and in contrast to activist autobiographies such as those of Davis, the contention begins with the writing itself and aims to unsettle its readers into a position of dissent vis-à-vis dominant notions of what is normal or just. Leigh Gilmore (2022: 432) encapsulates this succinctly: "Life writing can take us ethically where institutions fail." Consequently, the testimonial documentation of violence does not merely entail a re-enactment of trauma but a form of "narrative activism" (Gilmore, 2022: 430) or what we referred to earlier as "activist memory work."

The activist work of contentious life writing ranges from the AIDS memoirs that drew on Act Up's call for ending silence (Tougaw, 1998) to the Nauru letters by asylum seekers that transformed human rights activism in Australia (Whitlock, 2008). It remains one of the backbones of trans activism (Jacques, 2017) and informs anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements in Arab national struggles (Nasser, 2017). Social movements also use testimony strategically, as part of their "repertoire of communication" (Mattoni, 2013), in order to change public perceptions of what it means to have a grievable (Butler, 2009) or liveable life. The appearance of such testimonies can constitute and/or mark turning points in social movements. For example, the publication of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* in 1970 was a political event (Jackson, 1994). The

bestseller not only became a seminal text in the prison abolition movement but also established prison abolition as a momentous cause for the New Left (Duran & Simon, 2019: 88). This is not to repeat the "big books myth" that assumes that the publication of a book determines the origin of a social mobilisation, such as tracing the genesis story of the modern environmentalist movement back to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Meyer & Rohlinger, 2012). No single book can trigger a social upheaval on its own—*Soledad Brother* worked and circulated in tandem with other anti-prison literature, including the autobiography of the famous member of the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, Angela Davis, who also figured as the addressee of some of Jackson's letters. But working intertextually, as well as in interaction with different publics thanks to their circulation, stories of individual lives constitute and change the "cultural environment" that determines the intelligibility and legitimacy of movement repertoires (Williams, 2004: 102). Specifically, life writing—especially relating to the marginalised, the precarious and the stateless—can craft new models of subjectivity and render unfamiliar identities recognisable. As many of the examples collected below will show, it makes otherwise invisible experiences of oppression visible and, in doing so, links private lives to the public domain of politics.

While it is useful to make an analytic distinction between activist auto/biographies depicting a political life and contentious life writing that makes political claims by bearing witness to oppression, there are in practice also many overlaps between these practices that will emerge in the following pages. In their editorial in an issue of *Life Writing* journal that focuses on "Dissenting Lives," Anne Collett and Tony Simoes da Silva (2011: 352) write: "Dissent is most memorable when it is public, explosive, dramatically enacted. Yet quiet dissent is no less effective as a methodical unstitching of social and political mores, rules and regulations." This private form of "quiet dissent" is what becomes public through life writing as texts circulate and find a readership. As the great variety of life writing strategies covered in this volume will show, memorability is not a pregiven property of public events but is continuously redefined through language and narration. In this sense, the remembering of individual lives reveals the complex relationship between memory and activism as it shifts the scale and temporality of contention, from the decisive moments of political history to the lived experience of politics, and from the single protest cycle to long-term patterns.

Chapter Overview

As indicated earlier, this volume offers studies both of lives that become contentious when remembered and remembered lives that were contentious from the get-go. Following this distinction, the essays have been grouped into two sections, dealing with 'Narrative Activism' and 'Writing Activist Lives' respectively. What connects them is a shared concern with showing how individual lives gain meaning through a network of relations between the experiencing subject, the narrating subject and the various witnessing publics constituted by a text's readership.

The first section 'Narrative Activism' approaches life writing as a form of "literary memory activism," to recall Erll's term, and considers both the power and the limitations of storytelling in the repertoire of contention. The three chapters collected in this section explore written lives, the constitution of subjectivities through storytelling and the circulation of and commentary on those narratives as part of contentious politics. **Rosanne Kennedy**'s opening chapter asks how a memoir can seed and become a recurring resource in activist campaigns by analysing the decade-long story of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2015), in which Slahi narrates his detainment at the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Kennedy traces four stages in the memoir's role in activism and frames these dynamics of activist remembrance as a "memoir-activism circuit." While taking up the understudied question of how life writing can set in motion and continually reinforce a cycle of contention, Kennedy shows that the dynamics of longer-term cultural memory formation play an integral role in the "memoir-activism circuit." Likewise considering the role of activist life writing in memory formation, **Anna Poletti** analyses trans activist and philosopher Paul B. Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* (2021) as an attempt to produce cultural memory from a subjugated position in pursuit of justice. Looking at Preciado's use of ventriloquism, in which he adopts the voice of Franz Kafka's anthropomorphised ape in "A Report to an Academy" (1917), Poletti situates Preciado's address at the École de la Cause Freudienne's annual conference in 2019 within the broader context of trans life writing, in which the 'monster' figures as an essential motif. Poletti argues that Preciado's autobiographical account repositions trans people as agents of memory rather than patients who have a place within the history of medical discourse. While Poletti reflects on the political uses of ventriloquism in trans activist

life writing, **Nafiseh Mousavi** explores a similar case of narrative activism with an adopted voice in the work of Iranian children's rights advocate Hamed Farmand, whose activism involves writing his life in the voice of a child-self. Drawing on Farmand's autobiographical work as well as her interviews with him, Mousavi traces how online life writing enabled Farmand to work through traumatic memories of his childhood in Iran—where his mother was a political prisoner herself—and led him to engage in activist memory work to raise consciousness about children with incarcerated parents. While Mousavi's discussion of Farmand's trajectory from autobiographical writing to activism provides insight into the politicising potential of life writing, it also demonstrates how adopting a different voice plays into narrative activism, which resonates with Poletti's observations about ventriloquism.

The second section looks at how past collective action is remembered through life writing, and how that life writing changes over time. As the name suggests, 'Writing Activist Lives' examines how the cultural memory of contentious lives is mediated through auto/biographical forms. Bringing together case studies from different periods and geographical regions, the three chapters in this section analyse the narrative modes through which activist lives are constructed and disseminated over time. **Duygu Erbil** explores the activist memory work of Turkish socialist writer Nihat Behram, whose *Three Saplings on the Gallows* (1976) commemorates the 1972 executions of three Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries. Erbil observes how Behram establishes his narrating 'I' as a "solidarity witness" to the dead activists and conceptualises collective remembrance as a foundation for political solidarity. She then moves on to the contentious life of Behram himself, whose criminalised memory work constituted an act of political self-sacrifice, which got written into the book's later editions in order to memorialise revolutionary solidarity within the Turkish left. Erbil demonstrates that seeing life writing as solidarity work enhances our understanding of the dialectic of cultural memory and political solidarity. **Clara Vlessing** brings the discussion of remembering contentious lives to bear on a single individual, the French anarchist Louise Michel (1830–1905). Tracking the associations attached to Michel's figure—which anticipate her own memoirs, characterise those memoirs and persist, albeit in different forms, up to the present day—Vlessing shows that Michel's mythologisation is critical to the dynamic of her cultural afterlives: the openness of her story to interpretation means that her memory

has become a resource for different positions. Moving from the remembrance of one contentious life to that of a collective, **Verena Baier**'s chapter is on collaborative life writing by US Americans who participated in the US-Nicaragua Peace and Solidarity Movement (PSM) in the 1980s. Focusing on six works of life writing published between 1991 and 2022, she explores how the writers negotiate the cultural memory of the movement after its demise post-1990, but also how they mobilised that memory in relation to contemporary socio-political debates. This chapter underscores the role of life writing in maintaining activist engagement and in shaping the discourse surrounding the movement's legacy.

The collection is completed by an experimental memoir written by **Jaber Baker**, who takes the case of a Syrian prison to investigate the concept of a 'prison auto/biography,' framing this enquiry with a wider discussion about the relationship between personal and collective memory in life writing by the diaspora. Baker's essay brings together in the form of practice-based research the writing of activist lives and his own narrative activism. In the latter he uses the genre of biography while also creatively expanding it to capture the entanglements between personal and collective experience within the context of extreme repression. In this way, Baker contributes to the putative remembrance of occluded systemic violence.

A collection that aspires to bridge distinct fields of study cannot be exhaustive and inevitably has a limited historical and geographical scope. It goes beyond previous studies by covering varieties of activism as they are played out in different geopolitical contexts, including ones from the Middle East. In the process we have brought a new range of sources into visibility and highlighted the complexity of the activist memory work carried out by life writing in very different contexts. Overall, the collection shows how the nexus between memory and activism is negotiated through narrative acts that engage narrators, narrated subjects and readers in recalling the past while mobilising for the future. In this way, it offers relationality as a solution to the apparent incompatibility between individualist/subjective and collectivist/objective approaches to the mediation and remediation of lives. Auto/biography in the hands of certain actors enables the circulation of memories of activism and constitutes a form of political action. Through the intersubjective interplay between the narrator, remembered subject and the reader—each with their own values, ambitions, agency, achievements and facing different obstacles in their way—contentious life writing and the writing of contentious lives use language to bring together past, present and future: the memory of what has happened and hopes for what has yet to come.

Notes

1. Davis echoed this sense of discomfort about her own prominence at a meeting held in October 2022 to mark ten years since the occupation of the Oranienplatz in Berlin by activists for refugee rights:

   "but I am not so presumptuous as to add my own name [to the list of women activists who should be recalled] because I know that the reason why people know my name has more to do with what people did to save my life all over the world including here in Germany; I am thinking about the Million Roses for Angela—Million Rosen für Angela—that campaign, that helped to save my life; and so I see myself as standing in for collective struggles, for mass struggles." "Angela Davis Speaks at Oranienplatz, Berlin 2022," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGJ5LHZkYSg (at 55.21 mins).
2. On memory activism see, for example, Gutman and Wüstenberg (2021, 2023b). On the memory of activism see, for example, Hajek (2013); Rigney (2016). On memory in activism see, for example, Zamponi (2013, 2018) and Daphi (2017). For an integrated survey, see Merrill and Rigney (2024).
3. Note that Frederick Douglass (2016 [1845]) presents learning how to read and write as an enslaved person as the core strategy for emancipation, for enforced illiteracy was one of the strategies of enslavement.

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PART I

Narrative Activism

CHAPTER 2

The Memoir-Activism Circuit: The Afterlives of *Guantánamo Diary* in Cultural Memory

Rosanne Kennedy

Remembering Guantánamo in the Post-9/11 Era

In January 2022, the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the US detention complex at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba—also known as GTMO[1]—was commemorated by activists around the world. They called on President Biden to close Guantánamo—something Barack Obama had promised to do when he was President—and to either release or try the remaining thirty-six detainees. These protests exemplify "memory activism," defined by Yifat Gutman (2017: 1–2) as grassroots activism that draws on "memory practices and cultural repertoires" to strategically commemorate "a contested past outside state channels" with the aim of influencing public debate and policy. Mobilising the cultural repertoire of GTMO, activists wore black hoods and orange jumpsuits, and some adopted the kneeling position, instantly recalling media images of the first prisoners renditioned to Guantánamo in January 2002 (see Harb, 2022). Holding blown-up portraits of those still in prison, activists engaged in a mnemonic practice

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made famous by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in protests demanding justice for their kin, who disappeared during Argentina's 'dirty war.'

Beyond closing Guantánamo, grassroots activists and NGOs such as Amnesty International aim to engage the public in remembering and demanding accountability for the crimes, including torture and indefinite detention without charge, committed at Guantánamo by the US government. The use of torture, justified by legal advisors to the Department of Justice in the infamous 'torture memos' of 2002 (see *New York Times*, 2005), was officially ended by Obama on 22 January 2009.[2] Despite the contentions surrounding torture and the denial of habeas corpus, Guantánamo has not been an active site of collective memory in America. Instead, practices of American torture have been mediated through a "culture of comfort" which has quelled any disquiet the American public might feel (Sturken, 2011). But with the launch in 2024 of a nine-episode *Serial/New York Times* podcast, in which both ordinary people who worked inside GTMO and former prisoners are interviewed, together with the publication of memoirs, new films, ongoing trials, and investigative journalism, there are signs that a new cycle of remembrance may be in process.[3] And with Israel facing claims from UN bodies including the International Court of Justice and numerous NGOs that its war on Gaza, in response to Hamas's atrocities on 7 October 2023, flouts international humanitarian law, much like the United States did in sanctioning torture after 9/11 (see Falk, 2005), public remembrance of Guantánamo takes on a new urgency.

The conditions that have contributed to the collective forgetting of Guantánamo are identified by Marita Sturken (2022) in *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums and Architecture in the Post 9/11 Era*. She makes two arguments that, while not directly concerned with the GTMO regime, are relevant for understanding the struggles to remember it today. Firstly, she observes that the "intensely nationalistic memory of 9/11," which focuses on the individuals killed or injured in the attacks on American soil, enables the American public to maintain a "myth of innocence" grounded in the belief that terrorism comes from outside the nation (Sturken, 2022: 3). Secondly, she contends that the "intense memorialization" of 9/11 has posed challenges for American remembrance of the victims of America's response to that event—those who died or were injured fighting wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, and the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who were killed. In contrast to this normative discourse, Sturken (2022: 18) proposes that US

responses to 9/11 should be understood as "forms of terrorism rather than as justified actions of a nation threatened", in an American tradition that includes slavery, lynching, mass incarceration, and the genocide of Native Americans. Identifying museums, memorials, and architecture that engage viewers in remembering this counter-history, she argues that they potentially facilitate a radical shift in understanding America's relationship to terrorism as "an integral … force" within the nation rather than as coming only from outside.[4] If the patriotic era of 9/11 has indeed ended with the emergence of Black Lives Matter (BLM), as Sturken argues, we may see an opening for counter-memory projects such as those relating to Guantánamo.[5]

I share Sturken's concern that a nationalistic, sacralising approach to the American remembrance of 9/11 has made it difficult to remember the victims of America's response to that event. Rather than centring on monumental sites of memory, however, I consider what a small-scale "portable monument" (Rigney, 2004)—a literary memoir by a 9/11 Guantánamo detainee—can contribute to remembering its victims and to placing Guantánamo in a history of American torture and terrorism (see Gourevitch & Morris, 2008). To that end, I take Mohamedou Ould Slahi's internationally celebrated memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*—lauded as the "complete and true witness" of "the secret world of Guantánamo" (Mishra, 2015)—as a case study for investigating memoir as a vehicle for advocacy, activism, and cultural memory. In taking up the position of the witness, Slahi conjures memory on behalf of other Guantánamo prisoners—and in doing so, acts as a mediator of collective experience. *Guantánamo Diary* was published in a heavily redacted version in January 2015; an unredacted version followed in 2017, and a new edition, titled *The Mauritanian*, was published as a tie-in with the 2021 film of the same name (Slahi, 2015, 2017, 2021). An unexpected *New York Times* best-seller, *Guantánamo Diary* has been translated into over thirty languages.

As a 'terrorist suspect,' Slahi was still in detention when his memoir was published, despite a successful ruling in his 2009 habeas corpus case.[6] In this chapter I argue that *Guantánamo Diary* and its cultural mediations have succeeded in shifting the label of 'terrorist' from Slahi (and other detainees like him) to the American regime at GTMO. In so doing, the memoir and associated productions have contributed to the remembrance of Guantánamo as a "global symbol of American injustice, torture and disregard for the rule of law" (Shamsi, 2022) rather than as a justified response to 9/11. Central to facilitating this shift is the literary aesthetic

of *Guantánamo Diary*: its engaging narrative voice, its "figural realism" (White, 2004), and its storytelling techniques, all of which embed the events described in readers' memories. By recording the ordinary (human relationships, food, TV, and movies) within an extraordinary situation, Slahi's memoir helps readers understand and feel the injustices he and other inmates have been subjected to, and may move readers to action for his cause (Cizek, 2022: 77).

To identify cross-fertilisations between the concerns of memory activism and memoir as a literary genre, I introduce the "memoir-activism circuit," which takes a cue from Ann Rigney's (2018) concept of the "memory-activism nexus." Rigney draws attention to the complex interactions between memory and activism, including how activists seek to steer future remembrance (memory activism), how past activism is remembered in the present, and how the remembrance of past activism shapes activism today. In studies of memoir—and particularly 'prison literature,' a category to which *Guantánamo Diary* belongs—'advocacy' rather than 'activism' has traditionally been the preferred term (Harlow, 2011). Literary forms provide one of the few means by which prisoners can advocate for themselves, drawing attention to their cause without engaging in direct activism. While attentive to this usage, I introduce "memoir activism" to identify and track a longer cycle, beyond immediate advocacy, by which memoir may seed both activism and the kinds of mediations and remediations that shape cultural and collective memory.

My conceptual framework sits at the intersection of cultural memory studies and studies of life narrative. A foundational premise of the former is that there is no cultural memory without mediation and remediation (Reading, 2002; Erll & Rigney, 2012). Cultural memory results not from the publication of a singular text in isolation, but from the ways in which it is remediated and kept alive in other media, spread via their specific platforms and surrounding events such as film festivals, panel discussions, live readings, podcasts, protests, and digital activism. Literary critics have described life narratives that document violation and injustice as a form of testimonial or "narrative activism" that may promote "a change in the public narrative" (Gilmore, 2023: 8), and have tracked instances in which such memoirs have been taken up in campaigns for human rights and social change (Schaffer & Smith, 2004; Whitlock, 2007; Kennedy, 2022; Franklin, 2023). What has received less attention, in the fields of both cultural memory studies and life writing, are questions of whether and under what conditions memoir seeds activist campaigns, which in turn

contribute to the construction and transmission of cultural memory, and how that cultural memory may be reactivated in future activism, in a cycle that shapes longer-term collective memory. It is the complexity and dynamics of these interactions that I hope to identify by introducing the "memoir-activism circuit" as an analytic framework.

What makes *Guantánamo Diary* a fruitful case is not only its global reach, nor the speed and intensity with which it has seeded activist campaigns. It has also been remediated in other cultural forms, thereby contributing to the transmission of the memory of the GTMO regime in the United States and transnationally. These cultural mediations have, in turn, stimulated new campaigns of advocacy and activism in an ongoing cycle. To map these relations and how they articulate with each other, I identify four stages in the circuit: (1) pre-publication memoir advocacy (advocacy to publish the memoir); (2) memoir advocacy (the memoir as a medium for making a case); (3) memoir activism (promoting the memoir to seed activism for a cause); (4) memoir and cultural memory (remediating memoir in new cultural forms which may in turn seed new cycles of remembrance, remediation, and activism). These stages will not be present in all cases. My hope, however, is that this framework may serve as an analytic tool for mapping the place of the *literary*—and specifically *memoir*—in both short-term memory activism and longer-term cultural memory, and for tracing the dynamics of memory and forgetting as these stages build on each other over time. First, however, I discuss how Slahi found himself classified as a 'terrorist suspect' and the regimes of surveillance to which he was subjected.

Becoming "A Terrorist Suspect"

In *Guantánamo Diary*, Slahi narrates the story of how he became a contentious life and an object of multi-state surveillance. Initially, suspicion fell on him in relation to the failed Millennium plot to bomb Los Angeles Airport in 2000, due to his movements in conjunction with his identity as a Muslim man from a poor African nation. Born and schooled in Mauritania, Slahi won a scholarship to Germany in 1987 to study engineering, thereby gaining technological expertise. As a student in the 1990s, he spent two periods in Afghanistan training for Jihad, leaving voluntarily but maintaining some associations from that period. In Germany, Slahi sometimes hosted acquaintances passing through, who were later revealed to have links to 9/11; he transferred funds to a cousin

to pay his uncle's medical bills; and he received a call from a relative made on Bin Laden's satellite phone—circumstances that led the CIA to speculate that he was the lead recruiter for the Hamburg cell for the 9/11 plot. When he moved to Canada in 1999, where he briefly lived in a mosque, his profile raised the suspicion of CIA investigators, and he was subjected to surveillance and interrogations. Returning to Mauritania, he was twice intercepted at the behest of the FBI and the CIA—first by Senegalese and then by Mauritanian officials. After intensive interrogation, they found no evidence to charge him, and for eighteen months he lived quietly with his family, working as an engineer. Nonetheless, various media platforms including the *New York Times* outed Slahi to the world with the headline "Terrorist Suspect is Released by Mauritania" (Associated Press, 2021; see also Freeze, 2007). As a 'terrorist suspect'—a subject position produced by the discourse of the war on terror—Slahi was subjected to rendition, interrogation, detention, and torture. At the same time, being labelled as a terrorist suspect provided a platform that enabled him to exist politically (Fassin, 2008), and thereby contest both the identity imposed on him and the GTMO regime.

Not long after 9/11, Slahi was again pursued by authorities. On 29 September 2001, at the request of the Mauritanian secret police, he drove himself to the local police station in Nouakchott, Mauritania, for questioning, expecting to return shortly. To his shock, the Mauritanian officials handed him over "like a package" to the CIA, and as he tells it, his "world odyssey" of rendition—to black sites in Jordan, Afghanistan, and finally GTMO—began. In GTMO, he was told he was "the worst of the worst" (Slahi, 2017: 60); for seventy days in 2003 he was subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques" approved personally by Donald Rumsfeld (Slahi, 2017). After being tortured and ceaselessly interrogated, as he puts it, "my brake broke loose. I yessed every accusation my interrogators made" (Slahi, 2017: 372). As a reward, he was given paper and pencil, and began to write a diary in Arabic, which he later abandoned to instead write in his limited English in the hope of reaching an American readership.

Pre-publication Memoir Advocacy

As a genre, memoir enables an author to communicate personal memory of events through figurative and descriptive language, often supported by photographs, maps, and archival documents that provide an indexical link

to the past. Autobiographical memory is, however, never simply personal; to remember autobiographically is not so much to tap into stored mental images as it is, according to Kenneth Gergen, to "engage in a sanctioned form of telling" (cited in Eakin, 1999: 110). Autobiographical memory is facilitated through relations with others, including family, who are often the earliest teachers of socially acceptable "cultural scripts" for shaping self-narration (Eakin, 1999: 117) —such scripts are an example of what Halbwachs (1980 [1950]) referred to as the "social frames" of remembering. Additionally, while memoir originates in personal memory, it is a literary genre with specific writerly conventions, including the temporal logic of narrative, poetic devices such as figurative language, dialogue, scene, and style, the construction of truth, the appeal to believability, and the relationship between author, narrating 'I,' and narrated 'I' (Smith & Watson, 2010: 238). Memoir is not only a medium for expressing personal memory, however. If the issues represent a collective experience, especially where the group is subjected to harm on the basis of identity, the memoir may also function as a form of testimony or testimonio (see Kennedy, 1997, 2021). Through "acts of transfer" within and across generations, testimonial memoir may, in turn, contribute to cultural memory (Hirsch, 2012).

The first stage of the memoir-activism circuit, as it relates to Slahi's memoir, was the advocacy required to bring *Guantánamo Diary* to publication. A ruling in a case brought by a British citizen, *Rasul v Bush* (2004), determined that GTMO detainees could sue in the US federal courts for habeas corpus. On hearing about Slahi's secret rendition, human rights lawyer Nancy Hollander agreed to meet with him, and thereafter represented him. Finding that he was scared to speak to her for fear of reprisal, Hollander asked him to write his story for her, which would be protected by attorney-client privilege. He mailed his handwritten manuscript, written in the limited, colloquial English he was learning in captivity, with the final instalment delivered in September 2005. Before these pages could be sent, they were first read, redacted, and cleared by the 'protection team'—government censors. Hollander and fellow counsel Theresa Duncan encouraged Slahi to publish his manuscript; in a scene in *The Mauritanian* (discussed below) they tell him that "people need to read your story for themselves." They rightly anticipated that his story of the US government's practices of rendition, torture, and denial of human rights and due process would invite readers' empathy, incite calls for accountability, and have the global accessibility to cross cultural borders—all features of what

I have elsewhere called "moving testimony" (Kennedy, 2014). Recounting the period of torture, Slahi writes of the "unbearable pain," physical and psychological, that he experienced, but *Guantánamo Diary* is not a trauma memoir. Instead, ordinary events are remembered alongside extraordinary ones, and suffering is juxtaposed with positive memories of the friendships he formed with his guards, the games they played, the movies they watched, the languages he learned, and his developing critique of the risk Guantánamo posed to the American rule of law and democracy. By conveying something of the personalities and behaviours he encountered in this space at the limit, and the sheer terror, secrecy, and legal impunity of the Guantánamo regime, he made his story relatable and the injustice palpable, which helped to recruit advocates for his case.

Slahi's team included Larry Siems, a human rights activist at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and author of the *Torture Report* (2011), who edited and footnoted Slahi's 122,000-word manuscript. Before he could do so, the ACLU and Slahi's lawyers were engaged in continuous litigation with the US government to have the memoir released for publication; Siems only received it in 2012. By the time *Guantánamo Diary* was published in January 2015, a good deal of information about Slahi's case—including that his confessions were extracted under torture, and that the government lacked evidence to prosecute him—had been in the public domain for years.[7] What was lacking was his *voice*, and his subjective, sensory memory of events. His voice appeared in public for the first time when three short excerpts from his memoir, introduced by Siems (2013), were shared on the online platform *Slate*, building public interest in his story, and serving as pre-publication advertising.

Memoir Advocacy: The Literary as an Alternative Jurisdiction

The second stage of the memoir-activism circuit, as it applies to *Guantánamo Diary*, is the choice of memoir as a genre well suited to advocating for a cause in the public sphere. Given the predominance of 'advocacy' rather than 'activism' in discussions of literature in campaigns for social justice, it is worth clarifying these closely related terms, which are sometimes used interchangeably. A rhetorical mode of speech, advocacy refers to the "act of persuading or arguing in support of a specific cause, policy, idea or set of values" (Cox & Pezzullo, 2017: 177; see also

Cizek, 2022: 75). Like activism, advocacy often "takes place in complex, dynamic discourse arenas" in the public sphere (Cox & Pezzullo, 2017: 177). Literature, and especially memoir, can be a vehicle for advocacy precisely because it crosses boundaries, moving from an intimate, private, or hidden space—a family home, a hospital, a prison—into the jurisdiction of the public sphere. For a memoir to make the shift from advocacy to activism, I argue that it needs to find a public that takes it up in campaigns that involve individuals coming together to activate for a shared cause (see Kennedy, 2022; Franklin, 2023). Once a movement is formed, advocacy, as a crucial element of activism, is manifested in campaign tactics and strategies. While there is a long tradition of literary advocacy, especially in genres such as slave narrative, testimonio, testimony, and life writing, the uptake of literature in activist campaigns is becoming more common (see Erll, 2023).

Literary advocacy uses selected genres such as slave narrative, testimonio, testimony, and memoir to advocate for a cause or tell a contentious story, often from a site hidden from public view (Kennedy, 2021). Barbara Harlow (2011: 3) observes that in cases of prison writing, "[t]he 'literary' must assume … its own expanded sense of purpose, an advocacy, even adversarial role. Echoing Harlow, Slahi (2017: xxxiv) conceives of his memoir as "a kind of self-advocacy addressed to readers outside of Guantánamo." This self-advocacy is predicated on shared expectations that memoir, as a genre, promises the reader a form of truth-telling within the limits of a subjective perspective and the vicissitudes of memory. In Slahi's case, the subjective is legitimated by objective evidence: specifically, the extensive, detailed footnotes that Siems added, linking Slahi's personal narrative to the documentary record on his case. This mode of "advocacy with footnotes" (Dudai, 2006), more commonly found in the humanitarian genre of human rights reports than in memoir, supplements the subjective voice of lived experience with documentary evidence to legitimate the memoir's truth claims and believability. Introducing the 2017 edition of his memoir, Slahi reflects on his attempt, through the medium of memoir, to change the public narrative about him:

> For way too many years, the American government had … done the talking for both of us. It told the public false stories connecting me to terrorist plots, and it kept the public from hearing anything from me about my life and how I had been treated. Writing became my way of fighting the US

> government's narrative … I wanted to bring my case directly to the people. (Slahi, 2017: xxxiv)

In "regard[ing] humanity as … [his] jury" (Slahi, 2017: xxx), Slahi approaches the literary as "a more responsible jurisdiction" (Harlow, 2011: 3) for seeking judgement—a public, civic alternative to the secrecy of the military courts of GTMO. Not only is Slahi's memoir open to judgement when it enters into the public sphere; it also engages in judgement—of the United States, the CIA, his guards, torturers, interrogators, and lawyers.

Voice is a key feature in both memoir and advocacy. In 2003 Slahi was subjected to extreme torture, which is designed "to destroy a voice, to force a human being to attest to the power of the state" (Slaughter, 1997: 425–426). Slahi (2017: xxxvi) narrates his participation in a Combatant Status Review Tribunal (CSRT), held in 2004, as a turning point: "I gained credibility among the guards as an innocent man. I was recovering my voice. I began to think again about my story reaching someone outside of Guantánamo." In mobilising the idiom of voice, Slahi implicitly positions himself in a tradition of human rights testimony which values "the voice of the victim" as "offer[ing] a kind of truth that documentary evidence, reports, legal determinations cannot provide" (Peters, 2005: 276). His memoir, as I have argued elsewhere, combines elements of two traditions of literary testimony—Holocaust testimony and Latin American testimonio (Kennedy, 2021). It is, however, the particular features of Slahi's voice, his "uniquely, literally irreplaceable" performance as a witness (Felman & Laub, 1992: 205), that distinguishes the memoir, creating its signature aesthetic. For instance, he scripts a dialogue with one of his interrogators in the style of Kafka's 'Before the Law.' When Slahi (2017: 65) asks what he is accused of, the interrogator replies: "You tell me" —a reply that amplifies the absurdity of Slahi's imprisonment. Relaying a Mauritanian folktale, Slahi as the narrating 'I' figures Slahi the character as a 'piece of corn' facing off against the behemoth of the US government, mimicking the exaggerated style of a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Slahi's humour and humanity, together with his ability to mash up elements from American popular culture, Mauritanian folktales, German slogans, and Kafka converge to produce a story that "sticks" (Rigney, 2004), in contrast to the dry fact-laden versions that were available in *The Senate Inquiry* (United States Congress, 2014) and the *Torture Report* (Siems, 2011).

In addition to irony and wit, a distinctive feature of Slahi's voice is the surprising juxtaposition of *outrage*, which is oriented towards past injustice, and *hope*, which is future oriented. As Rigney notes, both outrage and hope are "responses to injustice. Yet, outrage … frames injustice differently by making *reaction* more salient than the recognition of suffering as such" (Rigney, 2018: 373). Slahi articulates his outrage—for instance at the way the Americans ignore Mauritania's sovereignty by kidnapping its citizen, and even worse, Mauritania complies with US demands by handing him over to the CIA. Rather than speak as a victim, however, Slahi reacts to his suffering by positioning himself as an advocate for justice, hoping that the rule of law will prevail:

> I rebelled against the idea that I should throw in the towel. I found that somewhere, deep down, the hope of getting my freedom back had never left me….I just couldn't believe that a democratic government with more than two hundred years of experience in upholding the rule of law could really rig trials, with everyone on board. (Slahi, 2017: xxxv)

His optimistic attachment to the American public's support for the rule of law may be an instance of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011). But by taking up the pen, he positions himself as an active agent who "write[s] his way out of invisibility" (Galo, 2015) and shapes his future and the future remembrance of Guantánamo.

Memoir Activism: Animating and Activating Memoir

In January 2015 the publication of a heavily redacted version of *Guantánamo Diary* was published, creating conditions for the third stage in the memoir-activism circuit.[8] This stage, in the case of Slahi's memoir, includes both 'advocacy for memoir' (see Siems, 2015) and 'memoir activism.' Memoir activism goes beyond the usual commercial publicity campaigns to promote a new memoir in the marketplace. Instead, it entails social justice advocacy designed to raise awareness of a cause—specifically, Slahi's plea for freedom, and more broadly, a desire to hold the US government accountable for the human rights violations practised at Guantánamo. Below I introduce two examples of memoir activism: firstly, under the rubric of *animating memoir*, I analyse a short video documentary that remediated and validated Slahi's memoir, which was uploaded immediately upon publication of the memoir in 2015, and remains

available, as of April 2024, on *The Guardian* website; and secondly, under the rubric of *activating memoir*, I consider the more ephemeral #FreeSlahi campaign, which ended when Slahi was granted his freedom.

Animating Memoir

To promote Slahi's memoir, *The Guardian*, together with Slahi's publisher, Canongate Books, produced an eight-minute video, *Guantánamo Diary: Torture and Detention Without Charge*, directed by Laurence Topham. Remediating the memoir in the accessible and captivating medium of animation—in an era in which visual culture has become the lingua franca of global communication (McLagan & McKee, 2012; Mirzoeff, 2015) —the video brought Slahi's story to audiences who may not read the memoir itself. *The Guardian* invited readers to "[w]atch an animated documentary about Mohamedou Slahi and his remarkable memoir, read excerpts from the book, and view the original handwritten manuscript."[9] These mediations of the memoir constitute a "rich media network" —what Astrid Erll (2014: 37) refers to as a "plurimedial constellation of memory" —that has positioned *Guantánamo Diary* as an essential text in the cultural memory of Guantánamo. *The Guardian* has taken a leading role in promoting both *Guantánamo Diary* and the broader remembrance of Guantánamo as a site of torture and injustice (see e.g. Leigh, 2011). For instance, in addition to the 2015 video, it has used the digital resources of print, video, and podcasting to promote discussions with Slahi, his lawyers and advocates, and later remediations of the memoir at key moments, as discussed below—all of which have helped to construct Guantánamo as an (off)site of remembrance.

As the first videographic remediation of the memoir, *Guantánamo Diary: Torture and Detention Without Charge*, merits attention for its "political aesthetics"—those techniques which make viewers feel, through sensory perception, the injustices of the political as manifested in bodies and minds (McLagan & McKee, 2012). Visualising the memoir in the popular form of graphic animation, the video opens with a row of cell doors, and takes us inside a cell where we see a figure sitting on a bench, leaning against a wall, writing. Introducing Mohamedou as both a prisoner and a writer, a deep male voice enlivens his words:

> The cell, better the box, was cooled down most of the time. For the next seventy days, I wouldn't know the sweetness of sleeping. Interrogation 24 hours a day, I was living literally in terror.

As a terrorist suspect, however, Slahi was a "tainted witness" (Gilmore, 2017: 5) who was unlikely to be believed. To legitimate him as a reliable narrator and someone deserving of our respect and compassion, the animated sequences are spliced together with conventional 'talking head' documentary scenes in which Hollander, Siems, and Slahi's brother Yahid Slahi tell the story of the prolonged litigation and censorship that preceded the memoir's publication, and endorse the truth of Slahi's account. For instance, the animated scene of the Slahi character writing in his cell is followed by footage of Hollander describing Slahi as a "modern Renaissance man," which represents him as someone like us rather than a foreigner whom we should fear. Indeed, after explaining that the CIA "didn't find any evidence against Slahi because there wasn't any," Hollander voices her trust and friendship for him by stating that once he is freed, he can live in her house (Fig. 2.1).

In contrast to the humanist and humanising trope of the Renaissance man, the next animated sequence represents Slahi's interrogator as an angry beast. The image of the bared, white teeth of a snarling man fills the

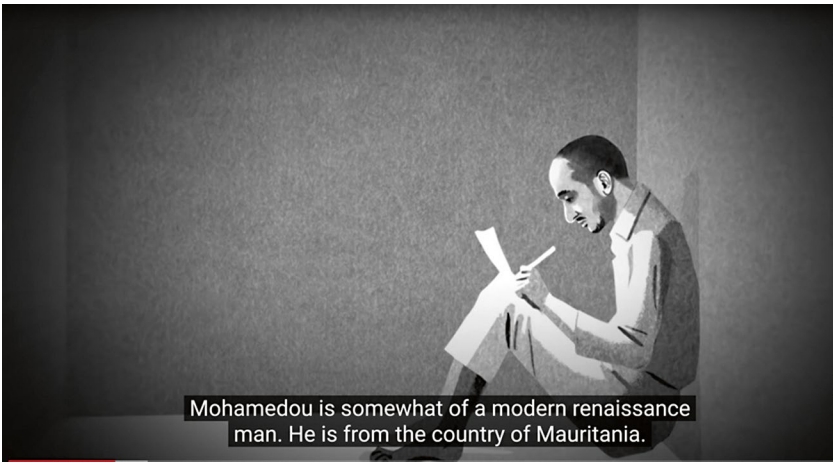

Fig. 2.1 Still from *Guantánamo Diary: Torture and Detention Without Charge* (dir. Laurence Topham). (Image by *The Guardian*. [permission granted])

screen, the teeth growing larger and more ferocious with each frame. Combining sound and image, this sequence conveys Slahi's sensory, felt experience of terror: "As soon as I spit my words, he [the interrogator] went wildly crazy, as if he wanted to devour me alive"—words which recall the Mauritanian fable about the rooster who eats the corn which opens *Guantánamo Diary*. By combining the aesthetic style of graphic animation and conventional documentary techniques, the video conveys the "relations of social power" that Slahi describes. In designing a cultural form to render Slahi's experiences of torture and detention manifest—"legible, felt, sensed" (McLagan & McKee, 2012: 9–10)—the video enables viewers to grasp Guantánamo as a site of political contention that demands our attention and action. Additionally, through its aesthetic techniques and its legitimating discourses, the video contributes to shifting the label of 'terrorist' from Slahi to GTMO. It thereby contributes to repositioning Slahi: no longer simply a *victim*, he is now a *witness* to the United States's breach of international laws regarding the treatment of prisoners of war and the use of torture in interrogation (Fig. 2.2).

At the time Slahi's memoir and the video were published, journalism was in the throes of re-negotiating its authority in a world in which information and fake news were proliferating (Rusbridger, 2018). As an independent media institution with a history of investigative journalism,

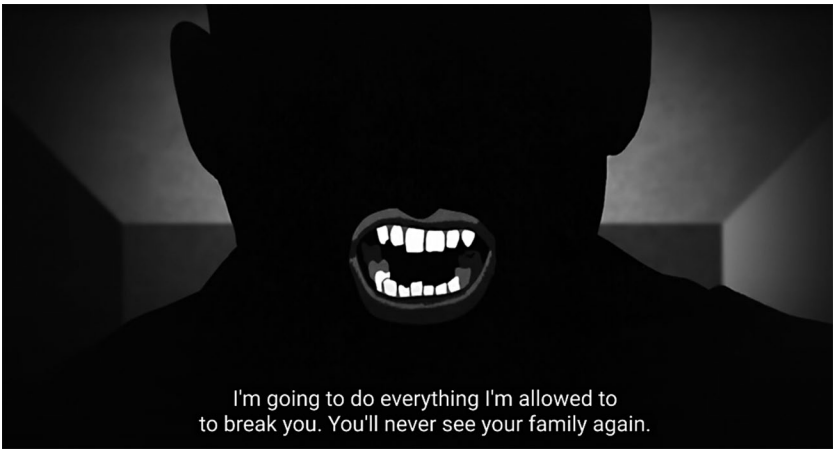

Fig. 2.2 Still from *Guantánamo Diary: Torture and Detention Without Charge* (dir. Laurence Topham). (Image by *The Guardian*. [permission granted])

known for bringing politically contentious issues to public attention, *The Guardian*'s endorsement of *Guantánamo Diary* was vital not only for promoting Slahi's case for freedom, but for beginning to change the official narrative of Guantánamo as a justified response to 9/11. Of course, while benefiting Slahi's cause and treating Guantánamo as a site demanding active remembrance, the video also enabled *The Guardian* to build its audience in the increasingly competitive world of online journalism (see Rusbridger, 2018). For example, the YouTube site on which the video is hosted invites viewers to "Subscribe to The Guardian on YouTube." In this way, the video not only markets the memoir, it also markets *The Guardian*.[10] Nonetheless, in pioneering an alternative cultural memory of Guantánamo as a calculated (if chaotic) regime of terror, the role of investigative journalists and of media platforms such as *The Guardian* and the *New Yorker* in shifting the label of terrorism from Slahi to the American regime at GTMO cannot be underestimated. Journalists such as Jane Mayer, Carol Rosenberg, and numerous others worked closely with lawyers and advocates to report on the abuses at Guantánamo and continue to do so, creating an archive of memory that can be activated in the present and the future.[11]

Activating Memoir

In publicising Slahi's case, *The Guardian* video created conditions that supported an online activist campaign to free him. Once *Guantánamo Diary* and the video were circulating in the public sphere, Slahi's powerful legal, media, and human rights advocates—Hollander, Siems, the ACLU, and his brother Yahid—built on the momentum to launch the #FreeSlahi campaign. This campaign added other genres—hashtag activism and petition—to the genres of memoir and human rights testimony. The campaign invited readers to support the #FreeSlahi campaign by tweeting and by digitally signing a petition, creating a small opportunity to do something to reverse the wrongs perpetrated by the US government. The #FreeSlahi campaign was international: Siems posted photographs on Facebook of protestors outside the US Embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on 2 June 2016, the day of Slahi's Parole Review Board (PRB) hearing. On the same date, Aisha Maniar (2016) of London's Close Guantánamo campaign posted photographs of a Free Slahi demonstration outside the US Embassy in London. The #FreeSlahi campaign exemplifies

Fig. 2.3 © Aisha Maniar/London Guantánamo Campaign. [permission granted]

how memoir may seed a temporary cycle of activism with a specific, limited goal (Fig. 2.3).

To publicise the #FreeSlahi campaign, events were hosted in New York and London at which numerous celebrities, including Colin Firth and Stephen Fry, channelled their cultural capital to support the campaign, reading sections of the memoir which were recorded and made available on *The Guardian Books* podcast.[12] These events, held in venues with a cultural history of resistance, enabled individuals to come together to support and advocate for Slahi's cause. At an event at Theatre 80 in the East Village, NYC, held shortly after *Guantánamo Diary* was published, the Executive Director of PEN America, Suzanne Nossel (2015), articulates the tight link between literary aesthetics, human rights, and collective memory. Describing the "enforced collective amnesia" she witnessed while in China around critical events such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, she observed that despite the Internet, mobile phones, and social media, young people in China "can't read about it, they don't study it, and their parents have learned not to talk about it with them." Drawing parallels with the US government, she introduced *Guantánamo Diary* as "the story of a secret that our own government has been keeping from us … We know about the detainees, we know about torture, and … yet we don't know." She observes that although we can read about Guantánamo

abuses in newspaper accounts, congressional testimony, and human rights reports, "until we read a work of literature, something that moves us … that we can't ignore … the government's secrets are still safe." In other words, through the poetics of figural language, literature not only makes the political a matter of feeling as well as thinking; it also makes it stick in our memories. Literature manifests the political on a human scale so that readers not only understand an issue; they may even be moved to action and activism by the injustices being articulated.

Memoir and Cultural Memory: Mediation and Transmission

The fourth stage in the memoir-activism circuit—'memoir and cultural memory'—centres on later remediations and adaptations in other genres, including theatre, a Hollywood feature film, and short documentaries. These remediations, supported by new editions and translations of *Guantánamo Diary*, transmit it to new audiences, including to a younger generation. Additionally, these remediations, circulated on various media platforms, create new opportunities for Slahi and his advocates to speak, as the issues raised in his memoir take on new meanings today. Such plurimedial engagements are essential not only for keeping *Guantánamo Diary* in circulation and positioning it as an iconic text, but also for producing a durable cultural memory of Guantánamo that may, under particular conditions, be activated in the present or future. Here I take as one example of such remediation and transmission a feature film, *The Mauritanian*, released on 12 February 2021—six years after *The Guardian* video and #FreeSlahi campaign figured Slahi as worthy of our concern, and just a year after George Floyd's murder by a white police officer in the USA provoked widespread anti-police protests. Thus, its release coincided with a period of heightened tension and activism regarding the treatment of Black and brown men by American law officers, which invited new possibilities for connection between GTMO and other sites of American terror and injustice.

While Black Lives Matter may have created a more receptive environment for a film about the US government's perversion of justice at Guantánamo, the timing of the release of *The Mauritanian* also coincides with the lifting, in the United States, of the "Muslim ban," a policy dictated by the then president Trump which, between 2016 and 2021,

restricted immigration from seven countries with majority Muslim populations. Director Kevin Macdonald's observation that *The Mauritanian* was the first American film with a sympathetic Muslim male lead takes on political significance in an American context in which, fifteen years after 9/11, Muslims in the United States continued to be treated as suspicious foreigners and potential terrorists. Released on the heels of President Biden's reversal of the Muslim ban in January 2021, *The Mauritanian* contributes to reactivating the counter-memory of Guantánamo that was stimulated by *Guantánamo Diary*, alongside other films, memoirs, oral histories, testimonies, and artworks critical of GTMO. Whereas Hollander had figured Slahi through the Western trope of the "Renaissance man," the title of *The Mauritanian* positions him as foreign and "other": the subject of a little-known African nation. Through the film's diegesis, however, the source of the title becomes clear: we learn that Slahi and another inmate with whom he formed a friendship referred to each other through the names of their homes—his friend was 'Marseilles,' he 'the Mauritanian.' Additionally, the title amplifies a line of argument in *Guantánamo Diary* that is developed in *The Mauritanian*—Slahi's oft-repeated claim that as a citizen of Mauritania, a dictatorship rather than a democracy, he did not, as a Guantánamo detainee, enjoy the same legal protections as detainees from democracies such as Britain or Australia.

Although *The Mauritanian* is based on *Guantánamo Diary*, the film is not a straightforward adaptation; instead, it focuses on the legal backstory of the struggle for justice for Slahi. A legal docudrama, Macdonald asserts that the film goes beyond Slahi's memoir to tell a bigger story "about the breaking of the rule of law" in which "the *system* is the villain and we see the system acting upon people" (as quoted in Rose, 2021). Slahi's memoir provides the details for the scenes of interrogation, torture, and humiliation. For instance, in one scene we see an interrogator demand of the Slahi character: "do you want to be a witness [for the government] or a defendant?" He says that he "cannot be a witness" because it would mean implicating other Muslim men. Scenes of torture are woven into a narrative about America's willingness to pervert its own legal and moral commitments to human dignity and to the rule of law in pursuit of revenge against Muslim men who were targeted as potential 'enemy combatants.' In focalising Slahi's perspective, the film contributes to developing a counter-memory of Guantánamo as a site of American terror and injustice. In proclaiming "this is a true story," however, the opening frame prioritises

the myth of filmic transparency over the cultural work of representation and mediation.

The Mauritanian is unusual in foregrounding the perspective of a Muslim man from a North African nation. Macdonald, however, regarded "the story of what the lawyers did … [as] a major part of Mohamedou's narrative" (as quoted in Rose, 2021). To that end, the film tells this story through the perspectives of Slahi's defence team—Nancy Hollander (Jodie Foster) and Teri Duncan (Shailene Woodley), and the military prosecutor, Stu Couch (Benedict Cumberbatch)—who are portrayed as heroic. Hollander takes it as her task to ensure that the rule of law—the Constitution's guarantee of the right of habeas corpus—is enforced, regardless of whether Slahi is innocent or guilty. Couch, a former Marine whose best friend was a co-pilot on the second plane that crashed into the World Trade Centre on 9/11, is brought in to prosecute Slahi. When he discovers that Slahi's confessions were extracted through torture and are therefore not admissible in evidence, he decides that he cannot prosecute Slahi—despite pressure from government officials to convict him and secure the death penalty. Couch's story was told in a *Wall Street Journal* article, "The Conscience of the Colonel" (Bravin, 2007), which features in the film. The film ends, diegetically, with a scene of Slahi boarding a plane, handcuffed and blindfolded, to leave GTMO. Extra-diegetically, outside the world of the film narrative, it ends with joyful scenes that bring the past into the present: we see documentary footage of the real Slahi arriving to a hero's welcome in Mauritania; grinning at home as he opens boxes containing copies of his memoir in multiple languages; a photograph of him with his American wife and their infant son; and singing a Bob Dylan song.

Although *The Mauritanian* conveys graphic scenes of torture and tells a story about the willingness of Americans to thwart the rule of law, it has been criticised as an instance of "white saviourism" which lets America "off the hook" (Bradshaw, 2021). Certainly, in presenting a narrative of Guantánamo in which American 'goodies' prevail over 'baddies' (Bradshaw, 2021), *The Mauritanian* conforms to a simplistic moral universe of distinct victims, perpetrators, and rescuers, and Hollywood's conventional happy ending, and more importantly, upholds faith in the idea that America is grounded in a moral order and human decency (the film shows at least a few Americans doing the right thing). On these grounds, the film can be criticised as legitimating the claim that the GTMO regime was devised by "bad eggs" rather than promoting a more radical critique that

regards GTMO as a product of the structural terrorism, grounded in racism and xenophobia, that undergirds the project of American empire. While this criticism of the film is valid, I contend that reading the film through the trope of the white saviour reductively simplifies the moral, political, and emotional demands on those who opposed the US military and intelligence regime at GTMO, and worked to secure due process for Muslim men who were deemed to be lives that did not matter. Jodie Foster, who plays Hollander, contends that the white saviour trope belittles Hollander's work as someone who "challenges the system from within" (Rose, 2021). Additionally, it misses the "intense" and "gut-wrenching" impact of the film on viewers and the way in which it contributes to a "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg, 2004) of GTMO. One viewer states: "I'll never forget how the U.S government is willing to beat innocent people to death until they are forced to … accept the charges that they didn't commit." Such comments, also present on sites such as *Goodreads*, offer evidence of an affective relationship to memory and show an engagement with the past from a present point in which there is a heightened awareness of the racialised dimensions of brutality carried out by police and other officials.

The impact of the film as a prosthetic memory which shapes viewers' understanding and memory of American terrorism at Guantánamo is further affirmed by Macdonald. He states that he has been moved by the response of ordinary Americans who, after watching the film, acknowledge that they no longer believe that "what we did down in Guantánamo was justified, that the only people who were held there were guilty of heinous terrorist crimes." Echoing the aim of memory activists, Macdonald acknowledges his gratification, since "[f]or any issue-based film, the ultimate goal has to be to change people's minds" (as quoted in Rose, 2021). In this regard, the film, despite its formulaic Hollywood aesthetic (conventional realism, Slahi's heroic day in court, good versus evil, happy ending), contributes to developing an understanding of the torture and detention regime practised by the CIA at Guantánamo not as a justified response but as a form of terrorism integral to the work of American empire.

The film is also significant for continuing the work of transferring the label "terrorist" from Slahi to the American regime at Guantánamo, and thereby contributing to developing a counter-memory of the American "war on terror." In a trajectory that began with *Guantánamo Diary* and continues in *The Mauritanian*, Slahi gradually shifts subject positions, in the public sphere, from being positioned as a *terrorist suspect* to being

valued as a *witness* to a terrorist regime. A key moment in this shift occurs in a scene in *The Mauritanian* in which Hollander tells Couch, "I think I figured out why they built the prison down here—it's not the detainees they are trying to keep out of the courts, it's the jailers." Daring to imagine a future in which those involved in perpetrating human rights violations will be brought to the International Criminal Court, she pointedly adds: "My client—he's not a suspect, he's a *witness*" (italics added). In this scene, Slahi's value as a potential witness changes—he is not a witness *for* the state but *against* it. Hollander's dialogue echoes Mishra's review of *Guantánamo Diary* as the "true witness" of Guantánamo, in a post-Holocaust tradition which figures the survivor as a "witness to the truth of history" (Wieviorka, 2006). Slahi himself, in speaking engagements flowing on from *The Mauritanian*, also begins to actively position himself as a witness rather than as a suffering victim. For instance, in a podcast interview, he was asked what he would want to say after reflecting on the events conveyed in *The Mauritanian*. He responds: "The US knew conclusively that I was innocent but they kept me because they knew I was a *witness* and I saw stuff I should never be able to tell the world" (italics added). Whereas in his memoir he states that he was "more interested in getting my story out than getting out of GTMO" (Slahi, 2017: xxxix), he now begins to activate the subject position, and with it the moral authority, of the witness. Likewise, at the Crossing Borders Festival in The Hague in November 2021, he explicitly uses the idiom of law and human rights to speak as a witness, accusing the United States of gross human rights violations. Through this language, continued in his interview in Episode Two, "The Special Project," of the *Serial* podcast (Koenig and Chivvis, 2024), we see Slahi turn the label of 'terrorist' full circle from himself to the Guantánamo regime.

Despite conflicting reviews (see Bradshaw, 2021), *The Mauritanian* not only transmits a cultural memory of Guantánamo; it also self-reflexively anticipates a future in which Guantánamo will be a site of denial and forgetting rather than of critical remembrance. The film represents this future in a scene in which Hollander and Couch share a beer at the gift shop at Guantánamo, surrounded by kitsch souvenirs including T-shirts featuring Muslim detainees as cartoon characters. As they look out at surfers riding the waves, Hollander warns that "One day this will all be a tourist attraction … and the cruise ships from the Keys will come and dock and crowds with their daquiris will walk around the cells and ask what we were doing down here." Rather than immersing visitors in an embodied, experiential

encounter with America's history of terror at Guantánamo, in which Americans "are all implicated" (Galo, 2015), tourists will instead be offered the distractions of entertainment and consumption. In this vision, the Guantánamo prison and its brutal history will be mediated via souvenirs bearing patriotic themes of American hegemony in the gift shop, as Americans become "tourists of history" (Sturken, 2007). Hollander's observation echoes Sturken's (2007, 2011) argument that Americans mediate difficult histories of terrorism—and torture—through kitsch consumables, which make those histories palatable. Such practices contribute to the forgetting rather than the remembrance of the racialised American regime of torture, indefinite detention, and denial of rights at GTMO.

Like *Guantánamo Diary*, the release of *The Mauritanian* initiated a cycle of intensified storytelling and remembrance of Guantánamo—an instance of "memorial dynamics" (Erll & Rigney, 2012)—as the film travelled on festival circuits. To celebrate its release, screenings and panels were held in Berlin, the UK, the United States, and elsewhere. Along with Slahi and Macdonald, Hollander has become an iconic spokeswoman for the film and a voice against the violation of human and civil rights at Guantánamo. For instance, she gave the opening address at the Berlinale festival in 2021 to celebrate the screening of *The Mauritanian* and took the opportunity to critically appraise the "regime-made disaster" (Azoulay, 2012) of GTMO. Additionally, *The Guardian* once again positioned itself as the premiere media organisation leading the charge to keep Guantánamo in the public memory. It sponsored a video documentary, "My Brother's Keeper," directed by Laurence Topham, about Slahi's relationship with his guard Steve Wood and their meeting in Mauritania thirteen years after they last saw each other, which coincided with the release of *The Mauritanian*. *The Mauritanian* and *My Brother's Keeper* were also the subject of two *Guardian* podcasts, one of which presented Slahi in conversation with Hollander as "the lawyer who fought to free Guantánamo's highest-value detainee," and the other featuring Slahi with Steve Wood.[13] The podcast host concludes by inviting listeners to join an online *Guardian* event at which "You can watch all three [Hollander, Slahi, and Wood]" together with film directors Macdonald and Topham.

The screening of *The Mauritanian* around the world—at the *Crossing Borders Festival* in The Hague, at Tunbridge Wells, and at various Human Rights film festivals including in Alabama—created platforms for Slahi, MacDonald, and Hollander to be in conversation with audiences, thereby bringing the American regime at Guantánamo into global public memory.

In resonating with current issues, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and protests against the exponential rates of incarceration of Black and brown men in the United States, these and similar events create occasions for advocacy and activism. Once again, this convergence of events around *The Mauritanian* creates the mnemonic intensity that propels an event, a history, or a site into the public eye, shaping collective memory. In engaging in these and other events, Slahi draws on his personal experience as a superstes or survivor witness (Fassin, 2008)—someone who experienced torture and indefinite detention—to speak on behalf of people subjected to inhumane treatment in a range of contexts, and to articulate the risks that democracies take when they deny human rights, as the United States did at Guantánamo.

Conclusion

As I have shown, *Guantánamo Diary* and its inter-medial remediations of Slahi's story across different platforms, including video documentaries, Hollywood film, festival events, advocacy, and activism, helped to bring the injustices practised at Guantánamo into the public sphere and set the agenda for future collective remembrance. Additionally, *The Guardian*'s animated video (2015) enhances the teachability of *Guantánamo Diary*, making it accessible and engaging for students and encouraging them to learn more about the sanctioned use of torture at Guantánamo—all of which contributes to producing a collective memory of American terrorism. Nine years after its initial publication, *Guantánamo Diary* continues to be remediated, and those remediations continue to be mobilised in activist campaigns. For instance, *Guantánamo Diary Revisited,* a short documentary released in 2022, follows Slahi as he attempts to meet and have tea with some of his former interrogators so he can forgive them.[14] This documentary is tightly linked with activist campaigns; it has been shown in promotions for the London "Close Guantánamo" campaign, featuring online interviews and conversations with Slahi. But activism itself does not ensure that a memory becomes widely shared and thus collective; the timing also has to be propitious. Sarah Koenig and Dana Chivvis, producers of *The Serial, Season 4*: *Guantánamo*, wanted to make a podcast about Guantánamo in 2015, the year *Guantánamo Diary* was first published and Slahi was still in prison, but the conditions were not feasible.[15] Now, with Slahi a celebrity in the world of Guantánamo memory, and the afterlives of his own story and the emerging stories of many

others, there are voices to draw on and shape in collective storytelling. Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement, and global protests advocating for a Free Palestine, have created more favourable conditions for a global remembrance of the injustices practised at Guantánamo. And new cultural forms such as podcasts and graphic narratives bring these pasts to new audiences in the present. All of this points to the need to study Guantánamo's "memorial dynamics"—that is, the ways in which memory ebbs and flows over time—and the conditions under which memories are activated or silenced (Erll & Rigney, 2012: 2–3).

Tracking the afterlives of *Guantánamo Diary* through the lens of the memoir-activism circuit shows that memoir is an affective and mobile vehicle for moving testimony from extrajudicial secret sites to global audiences (Kennedy, 2014). In telling his story, Slahi assumed testimonial agency, and contributed to the cultural memory of a contested past outside state channels, both in the United States and beyond. Additionally, powered by numerous remediations, *Guantánamo Diary* continues to fire into the future. But whether these metaphorical shots turn into the kinds of shouts that we see in vigorous protests or simply white noise in a cluttered public sphere is something that will only become clearer in the future. It is also important to acknowledge that *Guantánamo Diary* and its remediations are only one tradition in a much broader memory culture centred on GTMO, and which has been active almost since the American detention camps there were opened. Other important memory projects such as *Witness to Guantánamo*, the Columbia University *Public Memory Project*, and the UC Davis Guantánamo project feature online collections of oral history interviews, testimonies, and other resources, archiving the memory of Guantánamo against future forgetting. There is also of course a large body of human rights and legal literature on GTMO, including *The Torture Report* (Siems, 2011) and *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture* (United States Congress, 2014), along with memoirs and artworks. In sum, a substantial and growing archive is available to be activated now and in the future, and America's regime at GTMO, and its violations of human rights and condoning of torture will take on new meanings as the history of the present unfolds.

Notes

1. The American prison complex at Guantánamo, often referred to as GTMO, is notorious as a site chosen by the US government because it was believed to be outside the jurisdiction of the US courts, thus enabling the indefinite detention of 'suspected enemy combatants' who were denied access to habeas corpus rulings in US courts. For excellent accounts, see Kaplan (2005), Mayer (2005, 2008), Gregory (2010).
2. The US torture programme at Guantánamo was the subject of a Senate Intelligence Committee Investigation, which released its report in 2014 (see United States Congress, 2014). For further information see FACTSHEET: Torture at Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp, by the Bridge Initiative Team at Georgetown University https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-torture-at-guantanamo-bay-detention-camp/ (accessed 3 April 2024); see also Mustafa (2021).
3. See for example Adayfi (2021) and Koenig and Chivvis (2024).
4. Naomi Klein also connects the regime at GTMO to other cases in which the US government has used torture and terror in the belief that it was justified to achieve political ends (Klein, 2005).
5. Columbia University's *Public Memory Project* and the *Witness to Guantánamo Video Collection*, housed at Duke University Library, both of which feature digitised collections of oral history interviews, archive the memory of Guantánamo against future forgetting.
6. The Obama administration appealed the verdict, and Slahi's case was, at the time of publication of his memoir in 2015, languishing in the lower courts. When *Guantánamo Diary* was published, Slahi, still in prison, was denied access to it (Moreno, 2015).
7. See Bravin (2007); Siems, *Torture Report* (2011), Ackerman (2016).
8. The *Senate Inquiry into Torture* was released in December 2014, one month before the publication of *Guantánamo Diary*.
9. The video, *Guantánamo Diary: Torture and Detention Without Charge* (2015), is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YozKFwQKq_0#action=share. The handwritten manuscript can be viewed at: https://issuu.com/canongatebooks/docs/slahi_unclassified_manuscript_scan (accessed April 3, 2024).
10. In 2013, *The Guardian* produced an animated video about the hunger strikers at Guantánamo prison in March 2012; see Guantánamo Bay: The Hunger Strikes - video animation. This short video was part of *The Guardian's* strategy for building readership while transitioning from print to digital form.
11. See, e.g. Mayer (2005, 2008), Rosenberg (2016), Koenig and Chivvis (2024).

12. The celebrity readings from the events hosted in New York and London in late January 2015 were recorded and made available on *The Guardian Books* podcast.
13. Presented by Anushka Asthana and aired initially on 4 and 5 March 2021, these podcasts are available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2021/mar/04/guantanamos-highest-value-detainee-and-the-guard-who-befriended-him and https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2021/mar/05/the-lawyer-who-fought-to-free-guantanamos-highest-value-detainee-podcast.
14. Speaking about the past from a moment in the present, Slahi advocates forgiveness, which seems, superficially at least, to exemplify Robert Meister's (2011) concept of the reconciled victim, who lets the perpetrator nation off the hook by showing that no moral damage was done despite the injustice he suffered. But Slahi has also become an outspoken critic of the US regime at Guantánamo.
15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=JpZ5BZ8zigA.

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CHAPTER 3

Can the Monster Speak? Ventriloquism and Voice in Trans Activist Life Writing

Anna Poletti

Introduction

Paul B. Preciado is one of Europe's most prominent trans activists. For two decades, he has experimented with writing as a way of connecting the everyday practices of living as a trans person to a vision of a social and political reality that is not dependent on the logic of sexual or racial difference. In this chapter, I explore Preciado's use of intertextuality in life writing to insert cultural memory of trans lived experience into the medicalised approach to trans identity. His intertextual strategies range from engagement with intellectual history (in works such as *Testo Junkie*, 2008), popular culture (in his book *Pornotopia*, 2014), which examines the architectural philosophy embedded in Playboy's vision for modern masculinity), and most recently in the 2023 documentary *Orlando: My Political Biography* (2023). Preciado's work is characterised by a twinning of popular and literary culture as a strategy that utilises existing cultural resources to write a new memory of gender diversity, with a utopian investment in, and argument for, the transformative power of sexuality and migration to overturn

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systems of sexual and racial oppression.[1] In his activism, situated very clearly on the side of the European New Left, he calls for changes in social and political life that could destabilise the interconnection of racial and sexual hierarchies with the profit motive of late capitalism and the devastating impacts of border protection (Preciado, 2019).[2] In a number of his most influential works, Preciado uses the first-person perspective to weave the language of critical theory with stories of his lived experience. Intertextuality is central to Preciado's voice, and his vocabulary builds on the work of key figures of critical theory (such as Foucault and Butler) and European contemporary writers such as Virginie Despentes and the Chilean novelist Pedro Lemebel (Preciado, 2019: 13–19, 31). In this stylistic relationality, Preciado's project is situated firmly within the tradition of trans life writing, which Sandy Stone (2014: 92) argues "implies writing oneself into the selfsame discourses by which one is written—burrowing in and virally disrupting the smoothness and closure on which power depends." As many trans thinkers and artists have argued, trans life writing must contend with the highly specific individualising and pathologising history of life writing as a mechanism of administering trans identity: self-life-writing is a requirement of trans experience if a person wishes to receive access to medical care and changes to identity documents. Within trans communities, the administration of trans identity is the subject of cultural memory and activism (as I discuss more below). Trans people are written by the biopolitics of contemporary identity administration in ways that non-trans people rarely encounter. For Preciado, the inescapable nature of identity administration is what links trans people with other social groups (such as the colonised, migrants and the disabled), thus broadening out trans experience to a connection with the cultural memory of histories of oppression within Europe and conducted by European powers.

While Preciado's writing can (and should) be read as intellectual works that offer theoretical insights into gender, sexuality and politics, in this chapter I am approaching *Can the Monster Speak?* (2020) as a piece of life writing that has activist intent. *Can the Monster Speak?* is presented to the reader as the text of a lecture Preciado attempted to present to the École de la Cause Freudienne's annual conference, held in Paris in 2019. I will discuss this in more detail below, but first I want to clarify that I refer to the version of himself Preciado presents in *Can the Monster Speak?* as an activist because, as I outline below, the account he gives of the choices he has made about how he lives gender and sexuality combines two elements

of the definition of activism in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. *Can the Monster Speak?* details Preciado's commitment to pursuing an understanding of his sexuality and the place of gender in his identity through action, through living, rather than through contemplation, aligning it with the activist philosophy of Rudolf Eucken. This emphasis on living (rather than thinking) is evidenced in Preciado's strategies of intertextuality, which activate a literary archive and rewrite in order to remember the medicalisation of trans experience. As I demonstrate below, by telling the story of his activist approach to sexuality and gender to an assembly of psychoanalysts in Paris, Preciado uses life writing as a strategy to "vigorously campaign to bring about political or social change" in relation to the treatment of trans people (OED Online, 2023). By approaching the text as life writing with an activist intention, I draw attention to Preciado's use of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies to create a scene of contention. In particular, I am interested in his intertextual engagement with the writings of Franz Kafka as a means of narrating the memory of the complex (European) history of the administration of identity through the social structure of the patriarchal family and the political, epistemological and cultural mechanisms of colonialism. At the level of form, the contentious scene is constructed through Preciado's combination of intertextuality and testimony, which is a discourse that offers evidence in order to respond to or *create* a scene of dispute regarding knowledge on a specific issue or in regard to a specific event (Coady, 1994: 5; Gilmore, 2017).

My interest in *Can the Monster Speak?* lies in how life writing is a technique for remembrance that can be deployed by activists and how the activist aim of opening up a scene of contention makes use of and drives innovation in life writing as a social, cultural, linguistic and material practice of telling stories about lived experience. Personal storytelling is always motivated and situational: we present accounts of our lived experience, or stories about our identity, and our personal memories, in response to specific contexts in which we wish to be known, or institutional contexts in which we *must* be known to gain access to specific resources, including recognition in the social and political field (Butler, 2005; Plummer, 1995; Smith & Watson, 2010). Thus, when life writing involves a narrator reflecting on memory, the question is always (also) who are they remembering for? When life writing is a tool of activism, an individual is often presenting themselves as a representative subject to an audience they wish to persuade: they engage in personal storytelling and offer themselves up as a single example of a group who are making specific claims on civil

institutions (Martínez García, 2020; see also Gilmore, 2017). There is an existing body of scholarship in life writing studies on the intersection of life writing and human rights claims (Martínez García, 2020; Jensen & Jolly, 2014; Kurz, 2015; Schaffer & Smith, 2004); however, Preciado's intertextual engagement with one of Kafka's non-human narrators places it in a critical relationship with the Western logic of human rights. I do not read Preciado's claims in *Can the Monster Speak?* within the framework of rights as set down by the institution of the United Nations. Rather, I approach Preciado's activism as seeking redress for an injustice committed against himself and other trans people. I propose that we can best understand the scene of contention Preciado sought to open in his speech to the assembly of psychoanalysts as one that names, and critiques, the testimonial injustice he and other trans people have experienced through the pathologisation of trans identity. It is this injustice that he remembers by narrating his own experience through Kafka's writing. I take the term "testimonial injustice" from the work of philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007: 20), who defines testimonial injustice as "a distinctively epistemic injustice … in which someone is *wronged specifically in [their] capacity as a knower*." It is not rights, per se, that Preciado claims through his activist speech. Rather he uses life writing to narrate (and, in narrating, construct) a scene of contention between the mental health profession and trans people that contests who should be recognised as having knowledge about sexuality and gender. In the service of this aim, Preciado evokes Kafka's oeuvre as a location where the emotional and psychological pain caused by the friction between social roles and individual characteristics is remembered through narratives centred around bodily discomfort and metamorphosis.

Learning to Speak Trans: The Institutional History of Trans Autobiography

The frame narrative for *Can the Monster Speak?* is presented in a short peritext:

> On November 17, 2019, I was invited to the Palais des congrés in Paris to give a speech to 3,500 psychoanalysts who had gathered as part of the 49th Study Day of the École de la Cause Freudienne on the theme 'Women in psychoanalysis'. The speech triggered an earthquake. When I asked whether there was a psychoanalyst in the auditorium who was queer, trans or

> non-binary, there was silence, broken only by giggles. When I asked that psychoanalytic institutions face up to their responsibilities in response to contemporary discursive changes in the epistemology of sexual and gender identity, half the audience laughed and the other half shouted or demanded I leave the premises. One woman said, loudly enough that I could hear her from the rostrum: 'We shouldn't allow him to speak, he's Hitler.' Half of the auditorium applauded or cheered. The organizers reminded me that my allocated time had run out, I tried to speed up, skipped several paragraphs, I managed to read only a quarter of my prepared speech.
>
> In the days that followed, psychoanalytic organizations tear each other apart. The École de la Cause Freudienne is split, the pro- and anti-positions become more sharply defined. The speech, which has been chaotically filmed by dozens of mobile phones, is posted on the internet, fragments of the text are transcribed without anyone requesting my original text, then these are translated into Spanish, Italian and English and published online with little care for the accuracy of the words or the quality of the translations. As a result, approximate versions of the speech now circulate in Argentina, Colombia, Germany, Spain and France. In order to broaden the debate, I would now like to publish the complete text as I would have wished to share it with the gathering of psychoanalysts. (Preciado, 2020: 13)

I propose that we read this introduction as a frame narrative for the life writing that follows: a rhetorical, activist gesture that establishes a scene of contention rather than an accurate account of what unfolded on the day Preciado gave the speech. Thinking of the speech itself and the subsequent publication as an instance of testimony allows us to remain attentive to the origins of the text as a live performance delivered to a very specific audience to whom Preciado has been invited to speak and who is not neutrally interested in the topic of trans experience. Preciado's text addresses mental health professionals who hold the power to diagnose a person with gender dysphoria. Indeed, they are the audience for whom Preciado remembers his own transition, while he also remembers the role of mental health professionals in administering trans identity more broadly. What is important to note is how these two short paragraphs of evocative description establish twinned activist gestures: Preciado's original delivery of the speech, and its remediation and distribution as video, in unauthorised translation.

These forms of remediation justify the publication of *Can the Monster Speak?*, which is itself a reflection on and remembrance of the double autobiographical duty undertaken by all trans life writers, regardless of

their activist intentions (Prosser, 1998: 101). As Jay Prosser (1998: 101) argues: "The autobiographical act for the transsexual begins even before the published autobiography—namely, in the clinician's office where, in order to be diagnosed as transsexual, s/he must recount a transsexual autobiography." In her influential essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (2006) (a work of trans activism, theory and life writing), Sandy Stone interprets this autobiographical requirement through the shift from on-demand access to surgery to the formation of academic gender clinics in the United States in the 1960s. The emergence of a medical academic interest in trans people produced attempts to develop "a test or a differential diagnosis" that would be "objective, clinically appropriate, and repeatable" and therefore enable people to be accepted as patients into the new clinics (Stone, 2006: 227). Stone (2006: 229) argues that this project of turning transsexualism into a condition that justified the intervention of surgeons and other medical professionals ultimately failed: "the expected criteria for differential diagnosis did not emerge."[3] Instead, the requirement that the trans person be able to speak the version of their desires that reflected the criteria and gave them access to medical treatments led to trans people studying and reciting the "only textbook on the subject of transsexualism," Harry Benjamin's 1966 text *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. Stone (2006: 228) suggests:

> It took a surprisingly long time—several years—for the researchers to realize that the reason candidates' behavioural profiles matched Benjamin's so well was that the candidates, too, had read Benjamin's book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behaviour that led to acceptance for surgery.

Indeed, it is trans identity as something *made* by being *narrated and administered* within the interlocking discursive regimes of medicine and the state that Preciado remembers and contests in his address to the assembled audience of psychoanalysts who had come together to think and learn about the topic of women in psychoanalysis.[4] Trans activism remembers the centrality of the clinic as a scene of life writing because of the widely shared history amongst trans people of encounters with the state regulation of identity: through identity documents that denote one's gender, and the desire of some trans people to access medical care that enables changes to their body. In their need for the collaboration and recognition of others, trans subjects are like all of us: we are formed

relationally (Butler, 2005; Bornstein, 1994: 3). Yet, trans activists argue, this relationality is structured by the requirement that the trans person confess their identity within a discursive framework, the outcome of which needs to be a diagnosis (often called gender dysphoria) leading to medical treatment. In their studies of trans life writing, Stone and Prosser track how trans people and trans activism have developed a shared cultural memory of relating to the world through this specific intersection of life narration as a mandatory process for accessing medical care through practices such as sharing the strategy of studying diagnostic criteria. In his writing, Preciado takes up the question of how a trans person might create a scene of encounter with non-trans people, mental health professionals and European institutions that regulate identity and the body that is not structured by this logic. He argues for a redistribution of power within the encounter between the medical professional and the trans subject, and respect for the knowledge about gender as a lived reality that trans people have attained through their living of gender. Like many trans activists and writers before him, Preciado asks the fundamental question: How does a trans person speak to the non-trans other, and to institutions, from within a history of pathologisation?[5] In order to explore this question, he must move from a view of trans experience as having a history to making it the subject of memory (Nora, 1989).

An Invitation to Speak

Preciado directly addresses the history of ventriloquism of diagnostic criteria in trans experience—of learning to speak in another's voice about one's own life and subjectivity in order to be recognised by others—through his use of form. Discarding Harry Benjamin as intertext (and its logic of trans-as-diagnosable-condition), he takes up Kafka:

> To introduce myself, since you are a group of 3,500 psychoanalysts and I feel a little alone on this side of the stage, to take a running jump and hoist myself onto the shoulders of the master of metamorphosis, the greatest analyst of the excesses that hid behind the façade of scientific reason and of the madness commonly referred to as mental health: Franz Kafka.
>
> In 1917, Frank Kafka wrote 'Ein Bericht für eine Akademie'—'A Report to an Academy.' The narrator of the text is an ape who, having learned human language, is appearing before an academy of the greatest scientific authorities to report to them on what human evolution has meant to him.

> The ape, who claims to be called Red Peter, explains how he was captured during a hunting expedition organised by the firm of Hegenbeck, transported to Europe aboard a steamship, trained to perform in music halls, and how he later sprang into the community of human beings. Red Peter explains that in order to master human language and be accepted into the European society of his time, he had to forget his life as an ape. And how, in order to endure this oblivion and the violence of human society, he became an alcoholic. But the most interesting thing in Red Peter's monologue is that Kafka does not present this process of humanisation as a story of emancipation or liberation from animality, but rather as a critique of the colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies. Once captured, the ape says he had no choice: if he did not wish to die locked up in a cage, he had to accept the 'cage' of human subjectivity.
>
> Just as the ape Red Peter addressed himself to scientists, so today I address myself to you, the academicians of psychoanalysis, from my 'cage' as a trans man. … it is from the position assigned to me by you as a mentally ill person that I address you, an ape-human in a new era. I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with your discourse and your clinical practices. I am the monster who gets up from the analyst's couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen, your monstrous equal. (Preciado, 2020: 17–19)

There is much to discuss here, and I want to begin by considering how Preciado deploys the canonical literary figure of Franz Kafka and the story, "A Report to an Academy." He offers an interpretation of the story, but he also evokes his own conundrum through Red Peter. Is he (the he of Red Peter, the he of Preciado, a non-binary trans man) invited as an object of study or (to use Fricker's term) a knower? What is the nature of the "report" he is to give? How should one address a body of professionals with an established regime of knowledge in which the speaker is already situated? Preciado uses Red Peter to restate the trans activist claim (also made by Stone, 2006, 2014, and later by Halberstam, 2018, and Eades, 2021) that the relationship between trans people and the medical profession, and medical discourse, shares similarities with the relationship between colonised people and colonial discourse.[6] This relationship is predicated on classification. Stone characterises the relationship of classification as progressing through a series of steps that exclude the possibility of recognising trans people as possessing knowledge of their own experience: "The initial fascination with the exotic, extending to professional investigators; denial of subjectivity and lack of access to the dominant

discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation" (2006: 229; see also Halberstam, 2018: 4–9). The administration of experience and the body through professional investigators, indeed the inherent violence in the process of this administration, is widely acknowledged to be a key insight of Kafka's writing. For Walter Benjamin (1970: 128), "animals are the receptacles" of how the body is "forgotten" in such processes of administration:

> This much is certain: of all of Kafka's creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection. What corruption is in the law, anxiety is in their thinking. It messes a situation up, yet it is the only hopeful thing about it. However, because the most forgotten alien land is one's own body, one can understand why Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him 'the animal.' It was the most advanced outpost of the great herd.

Preciado's evocation of Red Peter deploys the potential of the animal as a device for reflection that messes up the classificatory impulse, rather than contributing to it. Animal-thinking (and speaking) is "extremely flighty" (1970: 128), registering anxiety but also, for Benjamin at least, offering hope precisely because of its ability to register the anxiety of embodiment.[7]

This rhetorical opening that initiates the scene of contention between the speaker and the audience, in which Preciado begins to speak by taking on the role of an interpreter of Kafka, is, on the surface, the end of Preciado's engagement with the story and the writer. And yet, a few pages later, as Preciado offers an autobiographical account of his desire to transition, Kafka returns to provide the very language and sentence structure of Preciado's memories of his childhood and young adulthood:

Preciado:

> I had not the least desire to become what the children of the white middle classes called being normal or healthy. I simply wanted a way out: I didn't care where it was. So I could move forward, so I could escape this mockery of sexual difference, so I would not be arrested, hands in the air, and forced back to the boundaries of this taxonomy … Let me repeat myself: I was looking for a door, an exit, a way out.
>
> I fear that people may not quite understand what I mean by the phrase 'way out.' I use the word in its most common and concrete sense. I carefully avoid using the word freedom, I prefer to speak about finding a way out of the regime of sexual difference, which does not mean instantly becoming free. Personally, I did not experience freedom as a child in Franco's Spain,

> nor later when I was a lesbian in New York, nor do I experience it now that I am, as they say, a trans man. (2020: 25)

Kafka/Red Peter:

> I feel that perhaps you do not quite understand what I mean by 'way out'. I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense. I deliberately do not use the word 'freedom.' I do not mean the spacious feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape, perhaps, I knew that, and I have met men who yearn for it. But for my part I desired such freedom neither then nor now. In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can also be sublime. In variety theatres I have often watched, before my turn came on, a couple of acrobats performing on trapezes high in the roof. They swung themselves, they rocked to and fro, they sprang into the air, they floated into each other's arms, one hung by the hair from the teeth of the other. "And that too is human freedom," I thought, "self-controlled movement. What a mockery of holy Mother Nature! Were apes to see such a spectacle, no theatre walls could stand the shock of their laughter."
>
> No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out; right or left or in any direction; I made no other demand; even should the way out prove to be an illusion; the demand was a small one, the disappointment could be no bigger. To get out somewhere, to get out! Only to stay motionless with raised arms, crushed against a wooden wall. (1983: 253–254)

What should we make of this? What kind of testimony is Preciado giving with these echoes, these sentences in which he speaks about his lived experience using the phrasing of Red Peter? At the level of form, it does not entirely align with testimonial discourse as it is theorised in law, philosophy and literature in which the eyewitness gives an account of an event that is uniquely theirs and which can offer an epistemic resource about what happened (Derrida, 2000; Coady, 1994; Lackey, 2008; Felman & Laub, 1992). Preciado's description of his experience is both his and not his; he is speaking as/with Kafka. If, as philosophers from both the European and Anglophone traditions agree, testimony is a viable epistemic resource that the hearer can take as the foundation for reasoned belief—that is, it can tell us something unique about the world that we can rely on—is it still testimony if Preciado speaks in the voice of a fictional anthropomorphised ape from the canon of European literature? This

question is important for Preciado's activist intent, which seeks social justice by making truth claims about the lived experience of trans people and which draws on trans people's cultural memory of their encounters with the administration of trans identity.

Formal Limits: Who Is Speaking, and to Whom?

To be an activist, I am proposing, is to believe in the power of action, and it is also to vigorously campaign for some form of justice. The specific justice I am suggesting Preciado is campaigning for in *Can the Monster Speak?* is epistemic justice, in particular, that trans people should be recognised as knowing subjects by medical professionals, academics, surgeons and the institutions they embody. As Lauren Berlant (2022: 4) puts it, "All politics involves at least one group becoming inconvenient to the reproduction of power. … The biopolitical politics of inconvenience increases the ordinary pressure of getting in each other's way." Preciado opens a scene of contention with the assembly of psychoanalysts by demanding that he not be an object of their study, but he be granted due respect and credibility as a knower. He is trying to get in their way, to disrupt their pathway to knowledge.

But two questions remain: they both relate to the ways in which Preciado diverges from the intertext. Why does Preciado position himself as a *monster*, rather than an animal? And why is his speech given under the phrasing of a *question* about the capacity of the *monster* to speak?

To answer these questions, we must return to the ways in which Preciado's text works with the cultural memory of trans experience, one that is, as Stone and Prosser demonstrate, shared within the trans community. In particular, we must situate Preciado's text within the context of trans life writing more broadly, in which the figure of the monster is an important motif. I am assuming, in what follows, that Preciado has read the texts I am discussing below (in particular Stone and Stryker), an assumption that takes its foundation in the time he spent in the United States and on his position as a trans theorist.

In 1994 Susan Stryker adapted the voice of Frankenstein's Monster in a performance piece that became an article titled: "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." In that article, Stryker situates her transgendered body as the grounds for a subjectivity that has something very fundamental and challenging to say to those who believe that gender is a given natural law that

we must each make our peace with. "[I]f you will listen to the monsters," Stryker says in her conclusion, "we do have something else to say … the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists" (1994: 250). Stone, too, draws on the figure of the monster to critique the idea—deemed both medically and socially desirable—that the goal of trans existence is to *pass* as the other sex: that is, for a non-trans person who encounters a trans individual on the street, or in a store, to not know that the other person is trans. In "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Stone argues that the assumption that to be trans is to desire passing, or the insistence that trans people *should* pass so as not to disrupt society's investment in the logic of binary gender, limits and denies the trans person's body as a site of "the promise of monsters" which can exceed representational, classificatory logic.[8] In both earlier works of trans theory, which are also works of activism that involve reflection on the lived experience of the author, Stone and Stryker work with the figure of the monster as a troubling figure in a similar way to Kafka's working of the animal. Stone and Stryker also encourage other trans subjects into the act of self-narration *as monsters*. The life writing monster, in the history of writing by American trans women thinkers and activists, is a figure that symbolises the potential for trans people to speak themselves into existence outside the logics and discourses that they may have spoken to access the medical treatment or alteration of their identity documents. The monster can empower the trans life writer as a speaker and knower.

Neither Stone's nor Stryker's texts are included in the list of nine sources provided in *Can the Monster Speak?* (Kafka's text is also not included.) The short list is dominated by works of European scholarship, offering a thumbnail sketch of the context in and from which Preciado speaks as "a trans man" and "a non-binary body" in Paris in 2019. One text on the list is Catherine Millot's *Horsexe: Essays on Transsexuality* (1990), originally published in French in 1983.[9] I do not have the space to paraphrase Millot's heavily Lacanian theory of gender transition here, and before moving on, I wish to note that it is widely critiqued as one of the many texts that condemns and pathologises trans experience.

What is interesting about the inclusion of this book as a source for Preciado is Millot's use of the life narratives of some of her own patients (trans people with whom she worked). Like all psychoanalytic writing, Millot's work is dependent on testimony of people for its evidence and involves the *rewriting* of that testimony within the logic of psychoanalysis. The analyst is the knower, the patient is the object of knowledge, but also

the evidence that the analyst offers in support of their claims to knowledge. *Horsexe* is laden with the voices and experiences of trans people—sometimes in direct quotation, sometimes in paraphrase. The term *monster* emerges in Millot's writing as a figuration of trans masculinity through a character Millot calls Gabriel, a trans man who approaches her to be interviewed after he has heard (through the trans community) that Millot is conducting research on trans experience.[10] Millot writes a biography of Gabriel under the title "Gabriel, or, The Sex of the Angels." Through the figure of the angelic Gabriel and his life history, Millot suggests that some people transition because they aspire to a third sex that is not available to them in the European symbolic system taxonomised by psychoanalysis. They choose to leave the category of woman for the category of man as a compromise. In this unrequited desire to be a third sex, Millot (1990: 126) proposes, "Transexuals want to belong to the sex of the angels." Millot's chapter reports a conversation with Gabriel, using dialogue and Millot's first-person narration. While at some points in the text it is clear that Millot is quoting Gabriel directly, at other points she takes the position of paraphrasing Gabriel's thoughts on his own experiences, and it becomes unclear whether Millot is using the character of Gabriel as a vehicle for her own opinions or if she is basing her assessment of trans men on what Gabriel has told her. The figure of the monster emerges in one of these cloudy scenes, in which Millot summarises a key plot point in Gabriel's life history that addresses the role of surgery in his transition:

> The father paid for the operations. Although Gabriel considers himself worse off than before, and that surgery made him a monster, that he is "done for," he nonetheless believes it was necessary. Socially speaking, things are now easier for him. If surgery is no solution, society makes it imperative. He now has no difficulty in being accepted as a man, whereas his former, equivocal bearing meant that he was snubbed for no reason at all. "People who refuse transsexuals surgery are condemning them to death. It's like saying, 'The limb is gangrened, but we can't operate.'" (1990: 131)

Can the Monster Speak? emerges from Millot's text with a different valance than its rhetorical use by Stryker. In her chapter dedicated to Gabriel, Millot (1990: 130) mentions he is writing his memoirs, but it is *her* summary of his experiences of gender and desire that take precedence in psychoanalysis. The trans person can speak in Millot's text, but only in fragments and murky prose in which his voice is often indistinguishable

from the analysts—reversing the ventriloquism described by Stone where trans people spoke in the voice of Harry Benjamin to gain entrance to the gender clinic. In Millot, it is the medical professional who appropriates the voice of the trans person and his figuration of the monster to establish her own credibility as a knower. Yet Millot's text is also an important, and vexed, text within the cultural memory of encounters between trans people and medical professionals that *Can the Monster Speak?* responds to.

In Preciado's reading, Red Peter wanted a way out of the existence that had been decided for him when he was captured. He had to find, for himself, a way of being within the social field he had been brought to against his will. When Preciado speaks as Red Peter, he does not speak about freedom—he does not speak, I am arguing, about rights. Instead, he speaks about finding "a way out" of the cage of being the object of knowledge. He seeks the opportunity to be accorded the position of a knower.

The Open Question: Trans Activism as Scene, Rather than Event

To study life writing about contentious lives is to identify when something in the social and political field is shifting when the social field itself is undergoing a transition because a group of people have chosen to speak about and take action in relation to injustice. To study the use of life writing in trans activism is to study terms and tactics that are not yet determined, that do not yet have agreed meaning. Trans activism occurs alongside the writing of this chapter and alongside my attempts as a life writing scholar to examine life writing as an activist strategy. Studying the contemporary moment requires a different set of methods and approaches than studying the past. It is to study language and culture as sites of exploration, struggle, play and experiment, rather than as sites where we can identify claims that are being communicated. The methods I find useful for studying things as they unfold come from Lauren Berlant (2011, 2022) and Eve Sedgwick (2003, 2011), who over the course of many years, articulated methodologies that examine cultural practices as artefacts of the present in which aesthetics and form are key strategies for thinking about the world and about power. Berlant in particular drew our attention to the cultural objects and practices that are produced *before* things have become solidified as identities or discernible interests. This method involves slowing down and looking at scenes that have not yet

cohered into events.[11] On the one hand, Preciado's speech to the psychoanalytic society was an event, in the sense that it achieves (or aspires to) the status of a marker in the political history of trans activism. This status is retrospectively constructed by the publication of *Can the Monster Speak?* and the presentation of the frame narrative that situates Preciado's speech as producing contention within the community of Freudian analysts.[12] But I don't want to accept the peritextual framing of *Can the Monster Speak?* uncritically and want instead to stay with the question I think Preciado himself is asking in his acceptance of the invitation to address the assembly and in the textual strategies he uses to do so. In considering Preciado's activist question about the speaking positions available to trans people, I arrive at scholarly questions: What happens to our understanding of life writing and contentious politics if we turn our attention to instances, to quote Berlant, "where there is a perturbation in an atmosphere that overwhelms, that reveals and unravels structures, but it also induces a kind of stuckness in relation to the revelation of an event" (Berlant in Poletti & Rak, 2013: 268). I have proposed that Preciado's text can be read as a scene rather than an event because Preciado speaks in the voice of Franz Kafka at key moments in his writing, dramatising the question of who is accorded the status of knower. In doing so, the text draws attention to the aesthetic strategies trans activist uses of life writing require. What impact might ventriloquism have on the political, social and personal power of life writing as a discourse that claims to speak the truth about lived experience? And more specifically, what might Preciado be saying about his experience of being trans by identifying himself as a monster and then speaking in the words of Kafka's anthropomorphised ape? At this moment in time, trans activist life writing often opens a scene of contention that addresses the history of testimonial injustice that has been at the very centre of the medical and administrative construction of trans identity. What emerges concretely from this study is the vitality of cultural memory to Preciado's objective of claiming the position of knower. The shared textual history of encounters between trans people and psychoanalysts (such as Millot) and the shared cultural memory of the body and the psyche as sites where social roles and identity categories are violently written and resisted through the work of Kafka are renewed through his writing.

Notes

1. See, for example, the introduction to the collection of his newspaper columns and other essays, *An Apartment on Uranus*, in which Preciado (2019: 32) claims: "Sex change and migration are two practices that, by calling into question the political and legal architecture of patriarchal colonialism, of sexual and racial hierarchy, of family and nation-state, place a living human body inside the limits of citizenship, even of what we understand by 'humanity.' Beyond the geographical, linguistic or corporeal movements which characterize both journeys, it is the radical transformation not just of the traveler, but also of the human community that welcomes or rejects the traveler."
2. See Quinn Eades' (2021) arguments regarding the dominance of American and British accounts of trans experience in the field of trans studies and how trans life writing from those countries is taken as representative of trans experience. Following Eades's argument, I situate Preciado as an activist and writer who writes trans cultural memory from a European perspective.
3. On the question of terminology (transsexual, transgendered, trans) see Jay Prosser's (1998: 171–177) overview of the evolution of the term transgendered in activism and Halberstam's (2018: 1–21) discussion of trans*, and Hayward's "Painted Camera, Her" (2021). See also Hayward's (2010, 2021) arguments for centring bodily change, rather than gender identity, in trans theory.
4. See Eva Hayward's "Spider City Sex" (2010: 226) for an alternative formulation of trans as an emergence, rather than an identity.
5. This question of how to speak and for whom is repeated throughout the first generation of American trans activist writing; see, for example, Stone (2006 and 2014: 10), Stryker (1994: 250) and Bornstein (1994: 4). In second-generation trans scholarship, see Hayward (2010, 2021) and Eades (2021). It is important to note that trans life writing, and trans scholarship, consists of a wide variety of perspectives on the question of the terms under which trans subjects engage and construct scenes of social recognition. My focus in this chapter is on Preciado's acceptance of an invitation to speak to the assembly of psychoanalysts, that is, to momentarily accept the role of functioning as a representative subject.
6. This chapter does not engage explicitly with the question of race and trans. See Marquis Bey's introduction to *Black Trans Feminism* (2022: 4) for an argument that trans thinking with race must abandon its attachment to marginalised identities. My focus on activism and epistemic injustice in this chapter does not take up the intellectual invitation Bey issues, but its rami-

fications for the status of life writing in trans activism are worthy of consideration.

7. See Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann's (2018) elucidation of zoopoetics based on the work of Benjamin and Derrida, and how the question of the animal poses unique issues for literary studies because animals are positioned as being incapable of self-representation.
8. Stone draws on Donna Haraway's article "The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for In/appropriated Others" (2020: 484) in which she asks: "Who speaks for the jaguar? Who speaks for the fetus? Both questions rely on a political semiotics of representation. Permanently speechless, forever requiring the services of a ventriloquist … in each case the object or ground of representation is the realisation of the representative's fondest dream." For Stone (2006: 232), the passing trans person (or the passing person of colour, or the queer person who passes as straight) chooses "invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance," but that choice also means the trans person continues to allow others to use their existence to shore-up the logic of binary gender.
9. I would like to thank Eva Hayward for discussing Millot with me and for sharing her perspective on trans cultural memory with me.
10. Millot's text takes very different approaches to trans femininity and trans masculinity. She is much more sympathetic to the position of trans men. This distinction in Millot's approach is not relevant to my discussion, but is important context given some areas of trans theory and activism continue to debate the importance of sexual difference (in the psychoanalytic sense). See the work of Eva Hayward (2010, 2021) for arguments regarding the importance of differential thinking in trans theory.
11. In theorising the scene and the situation, Berlant is engaging with a focus on the event in recent political philosophy and countering it with their own scholarly and theoretical interest in the ordinary. See, for example, "Introduction: Affect in the Present" in *Cruel Optimism* (2011).
12. We can be confident that a scene of contention was created because a prominent French analyst Jacques-Alain Miller was compelled to provide his own account of Preciado's speech and to reject the (necessarily) oppositional rhetorical Preciado adopts. Ultimately, Miller seeks to reassert the status quo, by situating trans people as objects of psychoanalytic knowledge, rather than according Preciado the epistemic justice he seeks. See Miller, "Docile to Trans" (2021).

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CHAPTER 4

Missing Mum: Reframing Imprisoned Childhoods in Autobiography and Activism in the Iranian Context

Nafiseh Mousavi

Introduction: From *Missing Mum* to Transnational Activism

This chapter investigates the various points of connection and continuity between autobiographical practice and activism in the Iranian context, where the boundaries between personal lives and activist agendas are increasingly blurred. Hamed Farmand (1975–), whose work provides a case study for this chapter, has connected personal lived experience with activism through autobiographical writing and storytelling with a special focus on the incarceration of parents and its effects on children. Due to the criminalisation of most types of political contention in Iran, ranging from protests to nonconforming lifestyles (such as women who do not wear the Hijab), imprisonment is increasingly becoming an everyday threat for many in the country. Such broad criminalisation and the high

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risks that activism entails lead those engaged in activism in Iran to constantly develop survival strategies to avoid persecution. For those residing in the diaspora, such as Farmand, the freedom to act comes with exile.

Paolo Rivetti (2017: 1181) argues that in highly authoritarian situations such as in the Iranian context, where infrastructures for social mobilisations are scarce, the agency of individual actors and the "emotions, perceptions and meanings of actors engaged in contention" are crucial in creating a space for dissent. The lively, diverse, and hazardous scenes of activism in Iran and the Iranian diaspora are created by activists whose personal experiences of oppression and discrimination feed into their activist agendas and practices. Many women, the LGBTQIA+ community, repressed religious and ethnic minorities, and survivors of political incarcerations and executions, who have been the direct victims of repression, have channelled their lived experience into broader activist causes and campaigns. Child rights advocate Hamed Farmand is one of these activists and founded his political practice upon his own experience of being the child of a political prisoner. Farmand's current activism is mostly realised in the form of consciousness-raising activities, knowledge production, and media debates on children's rights in general and the nuances of children's experiences in the highly politicised setting of Iran in particular, where incarceration is increasingly used as a tactic of control. Alongside the focal question of children of incarcerated parents, Farmand addresses other pertinent issues related to children and politics, such as the recruitment of child soldiers by the state since the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) to date (in the form of Student Basij[1]) and media coverage of child victims of the protests. His consciousness-raising activities largely target the Iranian population in Iran and across the diaspora while also expanding to international realms through transnational collaborations and by reframing the Iranian case at the heart of international discussions and legislation on children's rights.

Today, Farmand, residing in Canada, is president of the Children of Imprisoned Parents International[2] (COIPI) and a board member of the International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents.[3] He collaborates with activists from other countries in the Global South in producing research and knowledge about children imprisoned with their mothers, trains activists, and performs child rights advocacy through his media presence. His latest crucial contribution is a comprehensive whistleblowing report on the so-called nurseries in Iranian prisons where numerous children live with their imprisoned mothers in deleterious conditions,

hidden from international authorities and media observers (Farmand, 2022). These acts, which range from local to transnational modes of consciousness-raising and activism, target different aims and audiences. On the one hand, they address the states and authorities while also putting pressure on them by using international platforms, and on the other hand, they address the general population with the primary aim of raising awareness about children's rights. In Farmand's work, it is not only the state breaches of children's rights that are in focus. He equally criticises how children might be harmed by oppositional political discourses and activities. Regardless of the context, Farmand consistently highlights the personhood of children and challenges how their identity, needs, and well-being might be threatened in a tensely politicised setting.

Farmand's ten years of activism were preceded by an almost equally long period of autobiographical writing, during which he worked through his past experiences and unrecognised emotions in close connection with concurrent social and political events in Iran. This autobiographical practice unfolded over the years in the form of open letters and blog posts until 2016, when Farmand published a short memoir of the years during which his mother was a political prisoner. *Missing Mum. From Arrest to Release, Memories of a Prisoner's Child* (2016) is a collection of 35 short autobiographical episodes written in Persian, presented in chronological order, beginning with the memory of the five-year-old Hamed's[4] mother's arrest and ending with her return after five years. The narrative fragments in *Missing Mum*, told from the first-person point of view of the child self, reconstruct the child's experience while pushing the adult self to the margins. The child's body scale, positionality, temporal frames, and interpersonal relations are foregrounded with almost no explicit in-text interpretation or contemplation from the adult author. The book was published in London by H&S Media, a small, short-lived Iranian publisher. An unpublished English translation of the book by Elaheh Farmand, the author's sister, edited by Jane Lincoln Taylor, is the source for all quotes in this chapter.

As an activist-autobiographer, Farmand provides an interesting example for investigating the various connections and interactions between autobiographical writing and activism. In the introduction to the unpublished English translation, he writes:

> I also shared part of my book in English with children of incarcerated parents in Northern Virginia, when I took a mentor role in a camp in summer

> of 2016 and 2017. The facilitator of the program told me that it was the first time those children had heard a story discussing their circumstances that they could relate to, first-hand. Comments like these kept my energy up to work harder on the English version and for Elaheh to support me in translating the book. There's also another message for me: my story could be the story of all children around the world, who experience parental imprisonment. (2019: 5)

Farmand's personal experience reshaped into tellable stories through autobiographical writing equips him with a lens to see the nuances of what children with incarcerated parents experience and provides a means for establishing trust in vulnerable children and their parents. The revision and rewriting of childhood memories in Farmand's activism is an example of "memory in activism," through which personal memories are activated as elements "that can be appropriated and used in contention" (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019: 405). In this way, a "usable past" is engendered in the form of an interpretive enterprise towards the past to find elements in the past that can "be brought fruitfully to bear on current problems" and lay the groundwork for a desirable future (Sunstein, 1995: 603). In other words, through various mediations of the life narrative, the past and present interact "in producing scenarios for the future" (Rigney, 2018: 369).

In the following, I will first contextualise the childhood and imprisonment that is at stake in Farmand's case and then trace the interactions between autobiographical writing and activism in a diachronic order, starting from its origins in the blogosphere and through to the formation and publication of the memoir. In the final section, I will focus on the future Farmand envisions in his autobiographical narratives through his consciousness-raising practice. The chapter's findings are based on textual analysis of the book, available blog posts, and three conversations with Hamed Farmand.[5]

Contextualising *Missing Mum*: "Mum Is a Political Prisoner"

Missing Mum addresses the silenced memory of mass incarcerations and executions in the 1980s in Iran. It testifies to the complex experiences of children with activist and dissident parents in an underrepresented historical context. Not long after the 1979 revolution in Iran, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic (IR), an intense period of political

repression began, during which thousands of activists and dissidents from various opposition groups, as well as minorities such as the Baha'i community, were subjected to enforced disappearance, incarceration, and execution (Abrahamian, 1999). The victims were not only militant activists or those with leadership roles in dissident groups but also many sympathisers with minor roles. The elimination of dissidents and mass executions of political prisoners began as early as 1980 (Nasiri & Faghfouri Azar, 2022) and reached its peak in 1988 (Mohajer, 2020). During this time, marking the last years of the Iran-Iraq War and preceding the expansion of internet access, repressive state mechanisms were successful in obviating the memory of the executions and incarceration from public discourse and resulted in "forgetting" as "repressive erasure" (Connerton, 2008).

However, survivors, families of victims, and their communities, especially across the diaspora, circulated memories of persecution in order to resist this erasure (see Mousavi, 2024). They formed a grassroots justice-seeking movement and published memoirs and prison diaries in minor diasporic publishers (see Mohajer, 1998, 2020). At the same time, scholars and non-profit foundations such as the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation[6] began to support these claims about the past with more evidential documentation. The emergence of new media further enabled these activist remembrance practices. Online news media protected from local censorship opened up new possibilities to publicise previously silenced memories of persecution, as did blogs and microblogging platforms like Twitter (X), which empowered many individuals to tell their stories.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the creation and publication of narrative works by children of the 1980s dissidents. These works span a wide range of media and genres; examples include memoirs such as *They Said They Wanted Revolution: A Memoir of My Parents* (Tolouie-Semnani, 2022) and Farmand's *Missing Mum*; novels such as *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* (Delijani, 2013); and documentary films such as *Born in Evin* (Zaree, 2019). Telling stories of their politicised families and their personal experiences of turbulent childhoods, the authors of these works perform a simultaneous act of autobiographical narration and family-memory work. Drawing on Halbwachs's notion of "social frameworks of memory," Astrid Erll (2011: 315) positions family memory as the switchboard between personal and collective memory and argues that it is difficult to locate family memory as it emerges in "the complex interaction of various mnemonic levels: the organic-autobiographical, the interactive-familial, the institutionalised-national, and the mass

mediated-transnational." This complex interaction, Erll argues, is further complicated by gaps between these mnemonic levels. It is the tensions and gaps between different mnemonic levels that shape the narration in autobiographical works authored by those who suffered as children under IR's oppression in the 1980s, as we see in Farmand's work.

In the life narratives of these children, the family is constructed as a network of activism and dissidence in which they themselves, as witnessing children, have been affected, hurt, and shaped. In other words, the organic autobiographical mnemonic practice, which aims to reconstruct the often neglected child, is in constant struggle with broader familial and institutional levels of memory. As second generations inflicted by silenced memories and subjected to decades of "repressive erasure" (Connerton, 2008), these authors are at the same time carriers of the "post-memory" (Hirsch, 2008) of their parents' resistance and the oppression they have faced and the guardians of their own memories. Consequently, tension arises in their narratives; on the one hand, readers expect them to tell their parents' stories as heroes or victims of oppression, while on the other hand, they crave their own stories of trauma and survival to break free from the shadow of their parents. This tension can be placed between "organic-autobiographical," in Erll's (2011) terms, and the broader collective memory of resistance, which has some visibility but is not yet institutionalised or national. The 'interactive-familial memory' is perhaps the missing point that has begun to emerge in these narratives as a middle way for making sense of the authors' double positionality as both carriers of post-memory and recorders of their own autobiographical memory.

Cyborg Relationality: Meeting One's Past in Encounter with the Other's Present

Autobiographical writing and activism intersect as both relational acts and ways of being that are formed through interrelationships between individuals and communities. The formation of relational and narrative selves (Eakin, 1998) and the relationality of auto/biographical practices (Parker, 2004) have obtained new dimensions in "autobiography 2.0" (Schultermandl, 2018; Sorapure, 2015, 2003) as the distinct genre of autobiography on the web. Blogging and social media platforms now offer many possibilities for interaction and connection, merging the personal and the public into "masspersonal communication" (O'Sullivan & Carr,

2018). New forms of connection between users and platforms give new expressions to the constitutive relationality of human agents in cyberspace, which May Friedman (2013) calls "cyborg relationality." In such a context, as Friedman and Schultermandl (2018: 114) argue, "every act of online life writing simultaneously contributes to the creation of a sense of self and to an act of connection." In other words, such spaces of encounter have the potential for the emergence of contagious acts of autobiographical narration through which anybody involved in the encounter (as a content creator, reader, commentator, or in another way) takes part in the formation of a relational self.

It was indeed an encounter framed by cyborg relationality that provoked Farmand to open up about his silenced childhood memory of witnessing the arrest and incarceration of his mother and his experience of her absence. As Farmand recalled in a conversation with me, reading a blog post back in 2001 about a child whose journalist father was arrested with political charges triggered a series of strong emotional reactions. In the blog post, the child's mother, a friend and colleague of Farmand, expressed distress over the anxiety her child was experiencing. As Farmand recalls, other adults, commenting on the blogosphere or in the workplace, tried to console the mother by stating that the child would be proud of his dad—as a hero—for fighting for freedom of speech. According to Farmand, the similarity of the situation to what he had experienced himself more than two decades earlier triggered anxiety, anger, and frustration. Besides his identification with the child's experience of anxiety and distress, Farmand reacted to the adults' downgrading of this experience in favour of a 'greater cause.' The similarity between these adults' reactions to this child's experience and the reactions he received as an anxious child in the past added frustration to Farmand's anger, as he could not believe nothing had changed. Following that encounter, Farmand went through a phase of displaying PTSD symptoms as well as through an intensive period of remembering and writing about his personal experiences. He began writing an anonymous personal blog titled "Prisoner Number 0." The blog title "Prisoner Number 0" refers to children and families whose lives are extensively affected by the imprisonment of a family member. In many of the blog posts, Farmand used the letter format, addressing mostly children of political prisoners (2001, 2007). In a letter published on the blog, in 2007, Farmand addresses another child whose mother was arrested, highlighting the negative feelings and experiences that he believes connect the two of them. This letter epitomises his general approach to

intertwining his own life story with that of the addressee. It showcases a strong sense of identification with the child, and the blogger claims to be the only adult who can understand the child. In his view, the rest of the adults are most likely ignorant of the complexity of the child's emotions.

> When I heard about your mom and I saw that my wife was also worried, I envied you. I am not telling this for you to forgive me, I know you will. I don't know whether all those adults who are talking about you know how you feel. Do they know you might hate your mother tomorrow? Don't get upset. But you need her now, and she is not there for you. Do they know maybe you have already started to hate those who have caused all this? Maybe those adults, those who are writing about you and your mother, maybe they love this hatred. But what about you? Will you have to carry this baggage of hatred and spite all your life? Hating people who you don't even know. Do they know that maybe none of these happen, but you will wet your bed till you become a teenager? Do they know what it means to sleep-walk? Do they know all this or are they only fighting for their own cause? The same cause my mom and her people thought about. Now they are all either dead or busy with their own affairs, and it is me, and you in the future, who have to struggle with what was imposed on us. (Farmand, 2007)[7]

Taking side with the child, the blogger also acknowledges the complexity of his own emotions by reflecting on the envy he feels as he sees many people who are concerned about the child's situation, in contrast to his own isolation in childhood. At the end of the day, however, the letter, more than anything, manifests personal anger and a glimpse of Farmand's own past experiences, especially his frustration about the unchanged social attitude towards children of political prisoners.

This interaction between the personal and the other's experience, which creates space for reciprocal interaction, is indeed a recognised characteristic of letters as a genre (Jolly & Stanley, 2005: 94–95). By comparing letter and digital communication in an attempt to show their similarities and establish continuity in media history, Jérôme Bourdon emphasises how both media forms defy a sharp distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many communication. Bourdon (2019) defines the medium of letters as "a polymorphic, multi-generic, multi-use medium" (351) that forms a conversation between absent persons and offers "complex controlled or uncontrolled spaces between 'dialogue and dissemination'" (357). Farmand's letter/blog posts are good examples of such integration of dialogue and dissemination, addressing a specific addressee (the child) but

creating the possibility of being read by many (blog readers). In this way, the medium of the letter has the potential for revisiting one's past and relating it to the present through the act of addressing, thus rendering it 'usable' for understanding the child's experience.

In a few other open letters, Farmand creates a 'father figure' by addressing the known political prisoner Mohammad Nourizad[8] (1952–), who himself was an avid writer of political open letters at the time, as 'Father.' Farmand's letters, which reciprocate Nourizad's open letters, are angry. In his direct address, Farmand freely mixes the experiences and personality of his father with those of Nourizad. As Farmand also suggested in one of our conversations, this tactic of reciprocating the readily publicised open letter written by a renowned political prisoner enabled a wider dissemination of his own story and message. In one letter, Farmand reacts to an open letter written by Nourizad to his daughter and begins the letter with "Father, I'm full of hatred" (2008). He accuses the so-called father of sacrificing his own children and their lives for his cause and repeats firmly how he hates all those ideals and causes that have ruined his life. As the letter continues, Nourizad's figure is increasingly merged with Farmand's father, and memories of his own childhood slip into the narrative:

> Those who are practising democracy on the graves of my childhood friends are not aware of what we went through. But you are. You know better than anybody what it means to have a teenage boy who wets his bed. You, who with all you had on your plate, were moving between drugstores and psychologists to find cures for the strange illnesses of your child, during those five years that mom wasn't there. You were the one who had to handle your sleepwalking child. … You are not a hero for me, but I respect you and your commitment to your cause. (Farmand, 2012)

As is manifest in the examples above, Farmand used the dialogic potential of the blog platform and the genre of the open letter to perform a quest for 'being listened to,' intertwined with a struggle for understanding his own past in light of the unfolding present. The genre characteristics of the letter establish the grounds for dialogic remembrance built on responding to another individual. The blog, with its potential for interaction, affords the writer with space to invite the uninitiated readers to recognise the previously unseen and seemingly second-rate victims of oppression.

In our interviews, Farmand stated that the blogging practice has had multiple functions for him in working through his traumas and has helped him express his strong emotions. In his early practices of autobiographical writing, anger is the most visible emotion and the child-adult relationship is portrayed in black and white. Farmand takes the side of children whose parents' political activism jeopardises their mental health and future, and he identifies with their subjective experience as an independent person. The identification builds the foundation for constructing a child subject in the writing of the memoir. In this process, the anger gives way to other emotions, and the child-self, retroactively constructed, begins to talk.

Formation of the Child Subject: *Missing Mum* in a Hundred Pages

The notion of 'childhood' is simultaneously too general and too specific. In *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice* (2017), Allison James and Adrian James formulate the double-sidedness of the notion as "the twin recognition that 'childhood' is, at one and the same time, common to all children but also fragmented by the diversity of children's everyday lives" (13). The context specificity of childhood, as James and James view it, depends on how the needs and competencies of children are formulated in institutions such as the school system and the media produced for children, as well as through everyday practices and narratives that unfold in children's daily lives. Children's capacity to tell their own stories is recognised as a crucial resource for gaining agency in constructing childhood narratives (Douglas & Poletti, 2016). While this capacity enables children to participate actively in research and activism for children's rights, some children are never allowed to perform their agency. As Jane Siegel (2011) demonstrates in her book on children with imprisoned mothers in the USA, in research and knowledge production on children with incarcerated parents, the voice of children themselves is rarely heard.

In this context, where even child rights advocates might disregard children's capacity to speak for themselves, Farmand's consciousness-raising efforts address the need for recognising children's subjectivity as much as their vulnerability. Therefore, to highlight the complexity of feelings and experiences that mark childhood, Farmand employs a child's voice in *Missing Mum*. The narrating 'I' of Farmand's autobiography does not

narrate a remembered childhood from an adult position. Rather, he reconstructs his child self from memory to speak directly to the reader, whom he invites to recognise the subjectivity of a child narrator.

The retroactive and constructed nature of the child subject in *Missing Mum* draws much on the genre conventions of autobiography but also challenges the Western categorisations of autobiographical writing and demands a hybrid framework. Due to the child's voice Farmand assumes in narrating his life, *Missing Mum* poses challenges for its readers to associate it with a traditional autobiographical genre: it reads like a child's autobiography or child testimony while being presented as a memoir by the adult author. Indeed, the book conforms with the genre definition of memoirs as "short and mid-length books with a focus on a particular life experience" (Larson, 2007: 15). However, the genre's recent association with mass marketing (Rak, 2004) does not apply to Farmand's memoir, and it tends towards more recent approaches that destabilise the strict consumption binaries in defining the genre (Couser, 2012: 18). 'Autobiography of childhood' is another category that *Missing Mum* approaches but does not completely fit in. In *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (2010), Kate Douglas suggests that autobiographies of childhood contribute to the formation of cultural memory, while also having a tangible social impact that can generate "activism for children's rights," and thus show the potential for linking memory to activism (7). At the same time, these autobiographies also risk being "exploitative, unethical, and even voyeuristic in their representation of child subjects" (Douglas, 2010: 3). The books Douglas focusses on in her discussion of the genre are, unlike *Missing Mum*, widely read bestsellers, but her observations regarding the ethical tension and the relation to activism she mentions are also relevant for Farmand's work. This ethical tension, more than anything, is manifested in *Missing Mum* in the way the frames of memoir and autobiography are joined with 'children's testimony': a legally and psychoanalytically contested phenomenon (see Emberley, 2009a, 2009b; Goodman, 1984), that is recreated here in the form of a narrative genre.

Hamed Farmand's child's testimony unfolds in a narrative space that he creates by pushing the adult characters to the margins. A literal translation of the original Persian title, *Ja-ye khali-ye Maman*, reads as "mom's empty place," which is an idiomatic expression that implies that somebody's absence is felt. Additionally, the word "missing" in the English title can work as both an adjective for Mum, a mother who is not there, and as a

gerund referring to the child-Hamed missing his mother. Considered together, the titles, in different ways, foreground the absence of the parent and the emotional experience of the child, and open up for the child's autobiographical narrative, formed retroactively.

In the narrative, the child is both the one who sees and the one who narrates. Farmand solely draws on his subjective childhood memories to narrate his life in the tumultuous years of Iran and marginalises the collective memory of persecution and the concurrent war, which he saves for the paratextual additions to his book. There are 14 footnotes in the Persian text that almost double to 27 in the English translation, in which more clarifications are needed, either providing details about Iranian everyday life in the past or connecting the details in the text to collective events. The prose of the first-person narrative is simple and sober. The child's world is constructed through a representation of his bodily scale, his experience of temporality, and his frames of reference, and not much space is dedicated to clarifying the vagueness of the child narrator's experiences and emotions. The 6- to 11-year-old Hamed tells his own story through a child's oblivion and confusion in the face of historical events and foregrounds his affective experience of anxiety and misplaced guilt. Political and social events such as the Iran-Iraq War and the wave of emigration to Western countries are also implied and presented in the text but do not take a central space. The war is mentioned for the first time as late as chapter 17 of the book, in which Hamed narrates a stressful memory in the classroom.

> The night before, Baba had arrived late. But I had given him a quiz to sign from the previous night, and the one I had written at home. When Baba wasn't there, I had answered the quiz from memory. I had another page to write; I wrote that too. I thought, "I am almost done."
>
> But I still wasn't sure. My stomach felt more anxious. My teacher had arrived at the desk in front of me. Then it was my turn. I sat in the middle. I was looking at the notebook that belonged to Arash, my classmate who sat next to me. His notebook was blank. The teacher arrived. I heard Arash say, "Ouch!"
>
> Maybe the teacher had pinched his ear.
>
> "Ma'am, I swear, our neighbor's house got bombed."
>
> "Don't swear and lie in God's name. Go to the end of the classroom!"
>
> I didn't know if Arash was lying or not. His house was near ours. If his house had been bombed, we would have heard it too. When the alarm had gone off the night before and the air strikes started, there had been a loud

> noise. The next day, my brother said that near our aunt's house, there had been a bomb. My aunt's home was a lot farther away than Arash's. (Farmand, 2019: 32)[9]

The last paragraph of this section implies that the war has been ongoing for a while, as Hamed has previous memories of bombing with which he can test the authenticity of his classmate's remarks, but it has yet to emerge in Hamed's narrative. Moreover, the anxiety of the situation is not related to the ongoing war but rather to the child's immediate situation in the classroom, an ideologically charged and violent space where he fears his ear being pinched like his classmate's. While the prominence of the war creates expectations from Farmand's memoir to centralise the historical events in his life narrative, he intentionally avoids any representation of the war beyond the subjective experience of the child narrator.

Hamed's family consists of a nuclear core (he, his father, his absent mother, and his two siblings) embedded in the extended family, which is equally politicised. Over the course of the narrative, Hamed's (maternal) grandmother and more distant members of the family are arrested with political charges, and his uncle, of whom Hamed has no clear memory, is executed. The extended family contours the nuclear core in spatial terms, as Hamed's family lives in the same building with the paternal grandmother and a few other relatives. Consequently, the home and its surroundings are places of encounter for various people who, in the highly politicised atmosphere of the 1980s in Iran, had radical differences in their political views and activities. These contrasts, on the one hand, create high levels of tension and ambiguity in the family and, on the other hand, create a sense of alienation from the rest of society, which causes the child even more anxiety. He has to follow several, not necessarily understandable, rules to navigate in his world. He is told to tell others that his mother is on a trip and is strongly advised not to talk about her and his uncle's political affiliation.

> I had heard from Mamanbozorg that they called my uncles, who were Mojaheds,[10] "hypocrites." I didn't understand the meaning of the word 'hypocrite.' But I knew what death was. When the kids yelled after her, "death to Monafeghin (the hypocrite) and Saddam!" my heart dropped. I was now certain that my big uncle was dead. (Farmand, 2019: 32)[11]

In addition to political tension, the gender expectations that are integral to the normative structure of the family are another reason for the negative, ambiguous framing of the mother's political activities and imprisonment. For example, at one point, Hamed hears a family member saying "Careless woman…" who "left these poor kids and went after her own pursuits." Unsure, if they are talking about his mother, Hamed feels the urge to defend her but swallows the "Maman hadn't left by herself" that comes to his mind and stays silent and confused (Farmand, 2019: 17; 2016: 36). The child struggles to understand what he experiences and witnesses, having no resources other than his bodily experience and his subjective knowledge of the world. The father, while doing a good job in maintaining the family's livelihood as the primary caretaker, does not offer much clarification on the situation, nor does any other adult in Hamed's environment.

At the same time, Hamed is not protected from moments and spaces of distress: he frequently visits prison with his family and, on one occasion, even visits his soon-to-be-executed uncle of whom he did not have a clear memory. He witnesses the arrest of his mother and a second raid on their home by soldiers, who rummage through their belongings and take away photographs from their family album:

> One of them said to me, "Come sit, little one."
>
> I didn't want to sit. Without permission, he was looking at our photos. He had his left leg crossed over his other leg. I could see the sole of his shoe. It was black, with wedges. It was as dirty as I had thought. … My gaze turned toward the photo that his friend was showing to Baba. It was one of my uncle's black-and-white photos—my big uncle. … Where was he now? Maybe—no, he must be in a safe house, like the one in the game my cousin and I played. (Farmand, 2019: 25)[12]

The excerpt above demonstrates the testimonial quality of the whole text while also representing how the child is not protected from the violence of the situation: he witnesses in silence, second-guesses the causalities and the missing elements of the bigger picture, and tries to connect the dots by means of his memories and prior knowledge. However, more often than not, his memories prove to be fragmentary and incomplete and do not give him any more reassurance. He experiences negative feelings and confusion as his home, everyday life, and family memory are affected by state intrusion and the absence of his mother. His self-developed tactics

for understanding the situation fail because the interactions between the adults do not develop in the way he expects them to, and he has to silently witness the intrusion and his father's lack of power to avoid it:

> I wanted to take Maman's album from him. Why did Baba let them sit on our couch and look at the photos? … They stood up. The one who had been up on the ladder had a few photos in his hands. "He must give them to Baba," I told myself, and with my eyes I followed his hands. The photos were in his hands when he left. Had Baba not seen them? (Farmand, 2019: 51)[13]

The child's body determines how he can navigate different spaces while also providing a specific temporal frame for him, as it is a changing and growing body. The interaction of the small, growing body with its surroundings becomes a source of overwhelming and anxious feelings, especially in the prison's waiting room, where he becomes part of a larger crowd. At the same time, by measuring the changes that occur in such bodily interactions, the child obtains an understanding of the time that has passed. A prominent example of this bodily temporality is the mention of a green stool that Hamed uses to stand on and reach the sink when washing his hands. At several points in the narrative, he ponders over the relation between the last time he had used the stool and the absence of his mother, but he cannot reach a clear conclusion. The two following examples are from chapter one, one day after the mother's arrest, and chapter six, almost half a year after:

> I went to the bathroom. I stood on tiptoe so I could reach the faucet, and I saw the green stool in the corner. I turned the faucet on. I washed my hands. I turned the faucet off. I couldn't remember when I'd used the stool, maybe when Maman was here, just yesterday. (Farmand, 2019: 8)[14]

> In the morning, I woke up before Darya, just as I did on all the other holidays. I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and I saw the green stool again.
>
> Why hadn't I thought of it until that day? I asked myself. I answered that maybe now that I could reach the faucet, I didn't need it for washing dishes either. Darya had told me about the time I got up on the stool to help her wash dishes. She said Maman was not in prison then. But Darya must have made the story up. Because even the day after they took Maman, I had seen the stool but I still didn't remember using it. Darya had lied to me before,

> the way she did the afternoon when she showed me the sky and said she could see the moon. She then laughed at me. If her story was true, then why did I remember nothing? (Farmand, 2019: 15)[15]

The child tries to apprehend the passing of time by putting together his perception of his body's changes, his own memories, and his older sister's retold memory, but cannot reconcile the contrast between them: he must either accept his own amnesia or doubt the truthfulness of his sister's retelling. Such struggles with memory blackouts caused by and inducing anxiety become more frequent as the narrative develops: the phrase "I couldn't remember" repeats recurrently, and at one point, he even begins to forget his mother's face: "Now I was thinking of Maman. Her face, the face in the black chador, the face I prayed to see. I was beginning to forget her face" (Farmand, 2019: 33).[16]

One of the main intentions of Farmand's autobiographical practice is to represent the complexity and negativity of the feelings experienced by a child who faces the incarceration of a parent. The child Hamed misses his mother but is also angry at her. His anger, however, is firmly interwoven with a strong sense of guilt and anxiety, all causing recurrent bodily symptoms such as stomach aches and sleepwalking. He sees himself as the cause of all the problems, as he is not provided with any explanation for them: "Did she [Darya, his sister] know that when I prayed, I didn't cry? If she knew that every time I prayed I got angry at Maman, Darya wouldn't forgive me. … Would she not love me anymore if she knew it was all my fault?" (Farmand, 2019: 41).[17] The anger that dominates Farmand's blog posts becomes more nuanced and complex in the memoir as it is channelled through the child's subjectivity.

One of the main settings for Hamed's complex experience is the prison, which both separates his mother from him and becomes the only space where he can interact with his mother. As he follows his family to prison visits, he begins making sense of the space by referring to the frames of reference he already has from other institutions, especially his school. For instance, he sees that the soldier's book is similar to his teacher's attendance book (Farmand, 2019: 21), and the soldier reads out the prisoners' names, as his teacher does the roll call, but much faster (Farmand, 2019: 23). However, soon, the prison becomes a point of reference for making sense of other similar institutional displays of control in everyday life.

In the final episode of the narrative, Hamed's mother, her sentence having been reduced from 15 to 5 years, comes home. But the return does not mean an end to Hamed's struggle with a bundle of complex feelings. Rather, it marks the start of new ones:

> I looked again to where Maman was standing for prayer. She wasn't there. My heart dropped. Did it mean she had left again, without goodbye? Maybe she had never come back. Maybe Khaleh Joon would need to take me to the doctor—the doctor who specialises in mental health. (Farmand, 2019: 55)[18]

In our conversations, Farmand recalled how the whole family, and most importantly his mother, eschewed talking about the experience of those five years. In doing so, the family seems to have aimed for intentional forgetting as perceived to be "constitutive in the formation of a new identity" and moving on from the past (Connerton, 2008: 62–63). However, as Farmand's experience as an adult shows, the family's silence, together with the broader collective amnesia caused by state repression, did not lead to the formation of a different future. In contrast, collective amnesia and ignorance of such traumatic and complex experiences resulted in the repetition of the same patterns of ignoring children's subjectivity and experiences. Farmand's entangled memory work (Jelin, 2003) and activism aim to break this vicious cycle. Farmand's retelling of his traumatic experiences after working through them counters the amnesia of the family and society at large by putting organic, autobiographical memory of the minor agents of political dissidence at the centre. This act is especially important in the context of Iran, where, as explained before, families are increasingly politicised and activism has turned into a daily practice for many.

Conclusion: Orienting the Usable Past into the Future

Farmand's trajectory begins in a moment of encounter between the past (his experience) and the present (the child with an imprisoned parent). Similarly, his entangled autobiographical practice and activism are also geared towards creating conjunctions between the personal past and the collective present. Examining Farmand's path from past to present and from memory work to activism, this chapter demonstrates how memory is cumulatively created through multiple acts of mediation and is then activated as a resource for envisioning different futures. Through blogging

and thanks to the potential of digital platforms, Farmand was able to conduct memory work and work through his traumatic memories in a dialogue with his concurrent political context. Already in the initial stages, Farmand's memory work implied activism as he set to inscribe children's experiences in the memory of dissidence in Iran. As his memory work led to the creation of more fully fledged oral and written autobiographical narratives, it turned into a usable past that could be mobilised in children's rights activism. While Farmand's autobiographical writing is activist in raising consciousness about children's predicaments in politicised contexts, his activism does not end with the writing of his memoir but indeed begins from there. Farmand (2019: 6) seeks to forge a network of solidarity through retelling his story, based on the belief that "his story could be the story of all children around the world, who experience parental imprisonment." Using his capacity to identify the nuances of what these children experience, Farmand's activism, similar to his autobiographical practice, is founded upon recognising children as agential subjects.

Missing Mum is not as explicitly present in Farmand's activism today, as it was ten years ago, but has become the foundation or rather the 'metatext' for consciousness-raising. Nevertheless, his autobiographical practice is evolving alongside his activism. In our conversations, Farmand referred to his project of autobiographical writing as 'unfinished' and showed me a more recent blog entitled "The Timid Warrior" where he began to write memories of the years after his mother's imprisonment. As both ongoing projects, autobiographical practice and activism merge in a future-oriented temporality aimed at an alternative notion of 'child' in the specific context of the incarceration of parents. This notion equally defies the state's ignorance and the heroic conceptualisations of affected children and highlights children's personhood, subjective experience, and vulnerability. It has become even more urgent, as in the most recent protest movement in Iran, *Woman, Life, Freedom*, children's political agency became unprecedently visible in their wide engagement in the protest, and so did their vulnerability to state repression, with the high number of young children and adolescents killed on the streets.[19]

Notes

1. Sâzmân-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin (سازمان بسیج مستضعفین, "The Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed" is a paramilitary volunteer militia founded in 1979 with different branches in schools, universities, and other state sectors.
2. More information about COIPI is available at: https://coipi.org/.
3. More information about INCCIP is available at: https://inccip.org/.
4. As is now the tradition in auto/biography studies, 'Hamed' is used when referring to the child narrator-character of the book and Farmand's full name or surname is used when referring to him as the activist-author.
5. The interviews were conducted on three occasions in 2023 on 11 May, 28 June, and 2 November, over Zoom, and included five hours of conversation in total.
6. More information about the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation is available at: https://www.iranrights.org/.
7. All quotes from the letters are translated by me and are based on unpublished drafts of the blog posts that have been authorised to me by Hamed Farmand, as the blog was eliminated in 2008. As the official censorship and surveillance of cyberspace began taking shape in Iran, "Prisoner Number 0" and many other blogs were eliminated from the web by the domain-holders. Only a few drafts of blog posts were saved here and there, some of which are quoted and analysed. It is also important to note that Farmand's blog, according to himself, initially was not particularly well-known and read by a large audience, but went on to receive more attention from the public after some of his blog posts/open letters, such as the one to Mohammad Nourizad that is analysed later in the article, were reshared on other websites and received more attention from the public.
8. Mohammad Nourizad is a journalist, filmmaker, and activist who was first imprisoned with political charges during the 2009 protests (Iranian Green Movement) for almost two years, more than three months of which was spent in solitary confinement. After another short arrest nine years later, he was imprisoned again in 2019 and is still in prison at the time of writing (2024). During these years his sentence has been frequently changed to longer imprisonment with new political accusations such as 'insulting the supreme leader' and he has been moved between various prisons across the country located far from where his family live.
9. دیشب، بابا دیر رسیده بود. ولی هم دیکته روز قبل رو که بیست شده بودم بهش داده بودم تا امضا کنه و هم دیکته‌ای که تو خونه نوشته بودم. بابا که نبود، خودم از حفظ دیکته نوشته بودم. یه صفحه هم رونویسی داشتیم، اون رو هم نوشته بودم. با خودم فکر کردم: تقریبا همه کارهام رو کردم ولی باز هم مطمئن نبودم. دلم بیشتر پیچ داد. معلم‌مون رسیده بود به میز جلویی. بعد نوبت میز ما بود. من وسط نشسته بودم. چشم دوخته بودم به دفتر آرش، بغل‌دستیم. دفترش سفید بود. معلم رسید. صدای آرش اومد

که «آآآآخ». شاید گوشش رو پیچونده بود. «خانم به خدا خونه همسایه‌مون راکت خورده بود.» «خدا رو به دروغ قسم نده. برو ته کلاس» نمی‌دونم آرش داشت دروغ می‌گفت یا نه. خونه‌شون نزدیک خونه ما بود. اگه راکت خورده بود باید صداش رو می‌شنیدیم. آخه هفته پیش که آژیر کشیده بودند و حمله هوایی شده بود، صدای بلندی اومده بود. داداشم فرداش گفت که نزدیک خونه عمه‌ام یک راکت افتاده. خونه عمه از خونه آرش خیلی دورتر بود. ن

(Farmand, 2016: 80–81)

10. This term refers to members of the "People's Mohajedin Organisation of Iran," more commonly known as MEK: Mojahedin-e-Khalq

11. یلو .مدیمهفد ور قفانم ینعم .قفانم نگیم دندوب دهاجم هکم اهیاد هی هکم دوب هدینش هگرزبن‌امام زا بلند داد زدند: مرگ بر منافقین و صدام، یشرورپ مناخ زا دعب هکم اههچب .یچ ینعی گرم متسنودیم .مدرم مهم هگرزبدلم هری ریخت. دیگه مطمئن شدم که دایی

(Farmand, 2016: 82)

12. بیا بشین کوچولو». دلم نمی‌خواست بشینم. بدون اجازه داشت عکس‌های ما رو نگاه می‌کرد. پای» چپش رو انداخته بود روی اون یکی پاش. کف کفشش دیده میشد. سیاه و دندونه‌دندونه بود. همون قدر کثیف بود که فکر می‌کردم ... نگاهم چرخید به عکسی که دوستش داشت به بابا نشون می‌داد. یکی از عکس‌های سیاه و سفید دایی‌ام بود. دایی بزرگم. ...راستی الان کجاست؟ شاید، نه، حتما توی یکی از .همون خونه‌تیمی‌هایی است که با پسرعموم بازی می‌کردیم (Farmand, 2016: 60)

13. دلم می‌خواست آلبوم مامان رو از دستش بگیرم. اصلا بابا چرا اجازه داده بود تا این‌ها بشینن روی مبل‌هامون و عکس‌هامون رو ببینند؟ ... پاشدند. چندتا عکس دست اونی بود که از نردبون رفته بود بالا. «حتما اون‌ها رو می‌ده به بابا!». به خودم گفتم و با چشم دستهاش رو دنبال کردم. عکس‌ها دستش بود وقتی از در بیرون رفت. یعنی بابا ندیده بود؟ (Farmand, 2016: 60)

14. رفتم تو دستشویی. داشتم قدبلندی می‌کردم که شیر آب رو باز کنم، چشمم افتاد به چهارپایه سبز کنار روشویی. شیر رو باز کردم. دست‌هام رو شستم. شیر رو بستم. هر چی فکر کردم یادم نیومد کی از .اون چهارپایه استفاده می‌کردم. شاید وقتی مامان بود، همین دیروز (Farmand, 2016: 13)

15. صبح زودتر از دریا از خواب بیدار شدم، مثل همه روزهای تعطیل دیگه. رفتم دستشویی که دستام رو بشورم، چشمم دوباره افتاد به چهارپایه سبز کوچکی که کنار دستشویی بود. «چرا تا اون روز یادش نیفتاده بودم؟» از خودم پرسیدم و جواب دادم پیش خودم که شاید چون دیگه قدم به روشویی می‌رسید. واسه ظرف شستن هم لازم نبود تا بذارمش زیر پام. دریا یه بار داستان روزی رو تعریف کرده بود که من روی این چهارپایه رفته بودم و بهش تو شستن ظرف‌ها کمک کرده بودم. می‌گفت اون موقع مامان هنوز زندان نرفته بود. ولی حتما این داستان رو از خودش ساخته بود. آخه حتی فردای روزی هم که مامان رو برده بودند، چهارپایه رو همون گوشه دیده بودم، ولی باز هم یادم نبود که ازش استفاده کرده باشم. دریا قبلا هم بهم دروغ گفته بود. مثلا اون روز ظهر که آسمون رو بهم نشون داده بود و گفته بود تو آسمون ماه رو می‌بینه. بعد هم بهم خندیده بود. آخه اگه داستانش واقعی است، چرا من هیچی یادم نمیاد؟ (Farmand, 2016: 31)

16. تازه به یاد مامان افتادم. داره قیافه‌اش، همون قیافه تو چادر سیاهش که این چند وقت که دعا می‌کنم میاد جلو چشمم، از یادم می‌ره. (Farmand, 2016: 85)

17. یعنی فهمیده بود؟ فهمیده بود که من وقتی دعا می‌کنم گریه‌ام نمیاد؟ اگه می‌فهمید که هر وقت دعا می‌کنم از دست مامان عصبانی می‌شم، حتما منو نمی‌بخشید. ... یعنی دیگه منو دوست نداشت اگه می‌فهمید همه‌اش تقصیر منه؟ (Farmand, 2016: 105)

18. باز چشم گردوندم سمت جایی که مامان ایستاده بود برای نماز. هیچ کس نبود. دلم هری ریخت. یعنی باز بدون خداحافظی رفته؟ شاید هم از اول نیومده بود. پس شاید خاله جون حق داشت من رو ببره .دکتر، همون دکتری که می‌گفت متخصص مغز و اعصابه

(Farmand, 2016: 145)

19. According to different news outlets, this number exceeds 70. More information is available at: https://www.stimson.org/2023/change-and-continuity-in-iran-one-year-into-the-woman-life-freedom-uprising/#:~:text=More%20than%20five%20hundred%20protesters,of%20torture%20and%20forced%20confessions (accessed 12 April 2023).

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PART II

Writing Activist Lives

CHAPTER 5

Life Writing as Solidarity Work in the 1970s Turkish Left

Duygu Erbil

Introduction

1976 was an important year for the Turkish left, marking the first period of mass re-mobilisations since the military ultimatum of 12 March 1971 that had crushed the Turkish 1968 movement. It saw the abolition of the militarised State Security Courts (Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemesi), and, on 1 May, Istanbul's Taksim Square witnessed the first mass demonstration for Labour Day since its ban in 1925. In the midst of this tumult came the eventful publication of what would become one of the most iconic books of the Turkish left: *Three Saplings on the Gallows* (*Darağacında Üç Fidan*) by Nihat Behram. Besides commemorating the contentious lives of three Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries who were executed by the state in 1972, the publication of the book itself has had a contentious afterlife: the author had deliberately committed the crime of commemorating the condemned, and most importantly, had coaxed his readers into complicity. Put another way, Behram's commemoration was an act of and invitation to

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revolutionary solidarity, a sense of unity to be instrumentalised in socialist struggle. To this day, possession of the book may be considered criminal evidence when the possessor faces charges for political activities (Uludağ, 2013), a testament to its centrality to contentious politics in Turkey.

What makes *Three Saplings on the Gallows* such a politically contentious book is its memorialisation of three leftist student leaders of the 1968 movement—Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan, and Yusuf Aslan. The 'three saplings,' as they came to be popularly known after the book's publication, had co-founded the People's Liberation Army of Turkey (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu, THKO) and pursued a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary path before their capture and execution by the state in 1972. The THKO was but one guerrilla group among many during the Turkish 'civil war' that took place between 1968 and 1982 (Yenen, 2019), which involved ongoing violent clashes between the radical left and the nationalist far-right, divided along Cold War lines. Yet the 'three saplings,' and particularly Deniz Gezmiş, would become uniquely memorable historical figures, or "figures of memory" (Assmann, 2011) in Turkey, as they gave a face to the tumultuous 1968 mobilisations, the 12 March 1971 military intervention, and youthful political contention in general (Erbil, 2022). Decades of memory work by figures like Nihat Behram created this memorability by telling and retelling their story, turning Gezmiş, İnan, and Aslan into common reference points to remember Turkey's political past. Behram's narration in particular has itself turned into a reference point in these endeavours, becoming a central node in the intertextual network of the cultural memory of the 'three saplings.'

Three Saplings on the Gallows originally evolved from a series of articles published in the newspaper *Vatan*, leading Behram to undergo several legal trials. When he compiled the series into a book, it went through six printings and was immediately banned. The book's publication was one reason for the author's expatriation by the 1980 military junta (Behram, 2006: 204). In 1988, the banned book was briefly published with a new title, *Hayatın Tanıklığında Yürekleri Şafakta Kıvılcımlar* (In Life's Witness Their Hearts Are Sparks at Dawn), after which it was banned once again. The next edition had to wait for the lifting of the ban and the author's return from exile in 1996, resulting in the 21st print in 1997. Eventually, despite legal constraints, the book became one of the central references for the Turkish left and mainstream oppositional discourse in Turkish politics more broadly. The undaunted practice of publishing and reprinting the book crystallised the cultural remembrance of the 'three saplings' as a

form of defiant action, which now belongs to the Turkish political repertoire of both contentious and conventional politics.

Fundamentally, what enabled these Marxist-Leninist guerrillas to become such figures of memory both in the streets and in parliamentary politics is the way they died. Unlike many other 'martyrs' of the 1968 movement in Turkey, Gezmiş, İnan, and Aslan were not murdered on the streets. Their deaths were the result of the THKO court case, which initially resulted in the handing down of death sentences to 18 THKO members. The guerrillas were tried by the Martial Law Court, which transgressed constitutional legal principles and norms, and the judicial deadlock caused by this was resolved by the handing down of death sentences to only three of the defendants. However, the execution of the 'three saplings' was still unlawful for many. A public solidarity campaign against the death sentences turned their trial into a *cause célèbre*. Even international actors like Amnesty International and public intellectuals such as Pablo Picasso, Luis Aragon, Pablo Neruda, Samuel Beckett, and André Malraux joined the petition campaigns to stop the executions (Dündar, 2014: 411). Long after the failure of these campaigns, protesting the execution of the 'three saplings' remained a common cause for memory activists who refused to forget what they deemed historical injustice (Fig. 5.1).

Since 1972, remembering the 'three saplings' continued to be a contentious political practice for it meant bearing witness to injustice at the 'court of history.' For many, the trial and execution of the 'three saplings' is among the "cases judged by history" (*Tarihin Yargıladığı Davalar*), as a publication by the Union of Turkish Bar Associations with the same title dubs it—like other familiar *cause célèbres*, such as the trials of Alfred Dreyfus and the Rosenbergs (Çelik, 2020). Interestingly, the remembrance of the execution of these three Marxist-Leninist guerrillas often employs the metonym of the 'three saplings'; witness *The Cases Judged by History* where lawyer Adil Giray Çelik (2020) introduces the legal case with the title "Three Saplings on the Gallows." Many iterations of these figures' commemoration adopt the title of Nihat Behram's book, suggesting that their memorability cannot be explained only by the law's violence or the illegitimacy of the death sentences. Numerous cultural actors played a role in establishing their execution as a matter of public concern, something more than a jurisprudential case study. Decades of memory work inscribed them in cultural memory by bearing witness to the injustice they were dealt, and Nihat Behram in particular has been one of the

Fig. 5.1 Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the execution of Deniz Gezmiş, Yusuf Aslan, and Hüseyin İnan in Karşıyaka Cemetery. The banner by the Labour Youth reads: "The endless march towards independence, democracy, socialism in its 50th year." Ankara, Turkey, 6 May 2022. (Photo by the author)

frontrunners in this endeavour, providing others with a language to remember the 'three saplings.'

Three Saplings on the Gallows, whose canonicity is traceable in myriad intertextual references, is an example of literary commemoration. Beyond commemorating individual figures, the book practices memory activism pertaining to the legal legitimacy of the executions. Nihat Behram's book, in fact, was one of the first publications to retrospectively contest the court case, reviving the memory of the recent state persecution and the solidarity movement against the executions of the three young men. But its arrival at an auspicious time in 1976 aimed for more than a revival of legal discussions. As I will show below, Behram's memory work aimed to mobilise its readers to remember the 'three saplings' not as fallen criminals but as personifications of 'hope,' whose commemoration might inspire

political solidarity within the broader left-wing movement in Turkey and transcend its fragmentation into different factions.

Three Saplings on the Gallows exemplifies the entanglements of memory activism, the memory of activism, and memory in activism, which constitute the "memory-activism nexus" (Rigney, 2018). As a form of commemorative writing, the publication of the book was part of left-wing memory activism in Turkey if we understand memory activism as the "strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels" (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023: 5). Moreover, Behram memorialised the revolutionaries' lives with a belief in their socialist commitments, producing the memory *of* activism, in which their defeat by death was to be mediated into a hopeful story of enacting political agency. Furthermore, he crafted their story as a symbolic resource *in* activism in the pivotal year of 1976, as the left began to re-mobilise. His work of mediating a past with *political purposes* helps us define it as "activist memory work" in which "activists contest and reformulate certain memories" (Merrill et al., 2020: 4). More specifically, Behram's memory work was "solidarity work" as it actively forged political relations between political subjects to contest oppression (Featherstone, 2012: 37) by reformulating the memory of persecution as the memory of hope that binds the oppressed.

Solidarity was the main motive for Behram's work, which insisted that the commemoration of the revolutionaries meant forging solidarity with them. In his self-reflexive acts of remembrance, in which he presented his motivation to commemorate as *standing with* the revolutionary 'martyrs,' he conceptualised bearing witness to the 'three saplings' as a form of revolutionary solidarity. His words were materialised in his deeds. Indeed, Behram's act of witnessing led him to stand trial like many other revolutionaries of the time, because narrating their story implicated the author in their crimes. Crucially, memorialising the 'three saplings' with the aim of contributing to the re-mobilisation of the socialist movement was a conscious personal risk that Behram took, since it was a criminal act to commemorate the dead men. As Zeynep Tufekci points out, sharing the risk of resisting the state leads to "the interruption of ordinary life [protestors] experience under conditions of mutual altruism," turning the protest into "the pinnacle of an existential moment of solidarity" (2017: 105). Behram's altruistic act of witnessing injustice was inspired by and inspired this sense of solidarity. His memory work of mediating defeat into political self-sacrifice was Behram's own self-sacrifice, taking the risk of persecution

alongside other revolutionaries fighting for a common cause. Implicating his own life in their revolutionary actions and commitments, Behram embodied solidarity as collective risk-sharing by way of individual risk-taking. Despite the inevitable persecution, Behram's auto/biographical memory work crystallised commemorating the 'revolutionary martyrs' as a contentious political practice. Deliberately committing the crime of commemoration and suffering severe persecution gave substance to Bahram's claims about witnessing as acting in solidarity with the martyrs.

Reading the Autobiographical 'I' in Commemorative Writing

In this chapter, I analyse how Behram conceptualised and practiced witnessing as a form of maintaining solidarity within and throughout the ongoing publication of *Three Saplings on the Gallows*. To do so, I situate *Three Saplings on the Gallows* as relational life writing and trace Behram's reflections on remembrance and his self-representation. At first sight, this move might seem familiar to readers of Turkish literary scholarship which often studies an author's or a poet's 'life and works' (*hayatı ve eserleri*). Traditionally, biographical studies of Turkish literary figures dominate the reading of their works, and Nihat Behram in particular is known to be an autobiographical writer whose oeuvre "reflects" his lived experience (Akkaya, 2020). However, by situating Behram's memory work as relational life writing, I diverge from the conventional biographical studies of literary oeuvres in Turkey. What I propose is not biographical criticism, nor is it an attempt to fit *Three Saplings on the Gallows* into a strictly defined life writing genre, such as a memoir or a biography. Instead, I trace Behram's self-presentation as a remembering subject through an analysis of the subject positions he takes as a narrator who represents the story of the 'three saplings.' As such, I read Behram's work for the "autobiographical acts" (Smith & Watson, 2010) he employs in his literary commemoration of the three historical figures.

Behram's literary commemoration is not a mediation of the author's personal memory of these figures. Rather, it is a call to remembrance made through aesthetic and textual strategies to inscribe its subject in cultural memory. Additionally, its literariness is accompanied by other textual strategies that aim to establish the book as truth-seeking with a goal to redeem historical injustice. Therefore, Behram employs autobiographical acts not

to narrate his own life story, but to establish his credibility as a narrator who makes the call to remember the 'three saplings' with a political purpose. In his self-referential writing, Behram *constructs* a political subjectivity as a "solidarity witness" (Russo, 2018) and calls on his readers to step into this position of bearing witness to injustice as a practice of solidarity. Chandra Russo developed the term "solidarity witness" to refer to social movement participants who could take high risks and "utilize resistant modes of seeing and being seen to respond to political injustices" (2018: 4). Russo (2018: 21) explains that the concept emerged from ethnographic case studies in the American context in which solidarity activists self-conceptualised their acts of witnessing as a "means to see and testify to God's will which would be that the least among us be treated with dignity and justice," or drawing on legal discourse, situated witnessing as "means to see and testify to the truth of a crime." As we will see, Behram's memory work included both moral and political notions of witnessing as seen in Russo's case studies. By analysing Behram's autobiographical acts as strategies to construct his political subjectivity, I aim to demonstrate how this Turkish socialist author self-conceptualised his literary act of bearing witness as a solidarity practice in 1976.

To understand how Behram configures his witnessing self as a solidarity witness, I draw on scholarship on auto/biography that suggests that there are always imprints of autobiographical discourse in the biographical, which allows us to observe how cultural actors represent themselves by representing others (see the introduction to this volume). This follows from feminist sociologist Liz Stanley's (1992) undermining of the traditional separation between the author of a biography and the life they narrate biographically, which she considers to reflect a patriarchal bias reliant on a false notion of objectivity and a clean separation between the self and the other, the researcher and the researched, the private and the public. I adopt this framework to read Behram's biographical—or commemorative—writing autobiographically to analyse how he constructs a political subjectivity through remembering the 'three saplings.'

My analysis of Behram's construction of subjectivity draws on a Foucauldian understanding that subjectivity is not something we *have* but as something that is constructed within discourse through processes of subjectification. Becoming a subject constitutes taking up positions in each discourse. For example, in human rights discourse, one may take the position of an advocate, witness, or both, since discursive fields can afford a level of mobility. When we apply this logic to cultural memory and the

mnemonic discourses that organise it, a subject who 'remembers' and relates to the represented past does so by taking subject positions in historically specific discursive regimes of memory. Remembering subjects, in other words, are constituted by mnemonic discourses that offer specific positions from which to make sense of 'memory,' not as one's embodied cognitive process but as a culturally mediated phenomenon. By analysing the different subject positions Behram takes in remembering the 'three saplings' I show how he crafts his subjectivity as a solidarity witness on a textual level, thereby theorising a 'remembering we' as a basis for political solidarity. In short, I read Behram's self-reflective act of commemorating the revolutionaries' lives as an auto/biographical act, whose traces of the 'auto'—the 'self' of the remembering subject—can help us understand how Behram, *the narrator,* identified himself as a revolutionary and called on his reading public to remember the past in order to engage in revolutionary solidarity. While analysing the cultural remembrance of the 'three saplings,' I, therefore, shift my analytical focus from the remembered subject (the revolutionaries as represented in the commemorative narrative) to the remembering subject (the narrating 'I' of the commemorative account that controls the mnemonic discourse).

The first part of the analysis hence looks at the articulation of memory and solidarity that produces the discourse of solidarity witnessing. In addition to this auto/biographical reading of Behram's formulation of solidarity witness and his crafting of political subjectivity as a remembering subject, I turn to Behram's biography as it appears in later additions to the book, thereby analysing how it shapes the reader's reception of his narrative. In other words, I focus on Behram as a *historical actor* and trace the cultural memory of his book, whose criminalisation has been written into later editions, creating a paratextual surround that memorialises Behram's own political self-sacrifice. I suggest that this paratextual treatment turned the book into a 'portable monument' on the Turkish left, attributing legitimacy to Behram's vision of bearing witness or remembering as a form of political solidarity. What locates *Three Saplings on the Gallows* amongst the canon of activist memory texts in Turkey, I argue, thus resides in this dynamic of conceptualising *and* enacting political solidarity through bearing witness to the 'three saplings.'

Configurations of Solidarity and Memory

Reading Behram's *Three Saplings on the Gallows* auto/biographically also enables us to think about how cultural remembrance may generate political solidarity and can constitute an activist practice, which corresponds to ongoing discussions in the field of memory studies. Collective memory, or the sharing of memories among community members, is often understood as the grounds for *social solidarity* in Durkheimian sociology (Olick et al., 2011: 41; Sennet, 2011: 283). As such, collective memory is part and parcel of solidarity formation, that is, the construction of the we-ness of a group of individuals. In classic sociology,[1] then, solidarity is the defining concept that connects individuals' memories to a collective memory, constituting a remembering 'we.' Besides this configuration of collective remembrance, whereby shared memory acts as a cement for social cohesion, the memory-activism nexus (Rigney, 2018) introduces the notion of *political solidarity* as a key concept that requires further inquiry.

As Sophie van den Elzen (2024) shows, 'solidarity' has been a dynamic keyword for activists, and in the 1960s, the British New Left reworked their protest lexicon by resignifying it to mean "acting in common" rather than sharing a common identity. This was also the period in which anticolonial revolutionaries like Amílcar Cabral (2022) were reconceptualising solidarity as "connecting the struggles" of distinct liberation movements. Solidarity that unfolds in political action is different from the notion of social solidarity, which binds the community together by uniting it around a shared identity. However, as Zoltán Kékesi and Máté Zombory (2023: 5) point out, memory studies has a tendency to focus on "solidarity across difference" as a "problem of identity which obscures the historical role of Leftist political views."[2] Therefore, political articulations of solidarity and memory remain a relatively underexplored topic in the field.

Overcoming and bridging differences—achieving social solidarity—is often understood to be the intrinsic value of collective memory. However, the emergent interest in the memory-activism nexus and especially the uses of memory *in* activism (Rigney, 2018) calls for attention to the instrumental value of memory work as solidarity work, which produces "solidarity as joint action" rather than a shared identity (Sangiovanni, 2015). In classic social theory, solidarity is conceived as an integrative mechanism of society, or as the formation of a harmonious society based on ascribed similitude (Stjernø, 2005: 25–41; see also Candas & Bugra, 2010). However, solidarity as joint action—political solidarity—emerges in

struggle rather than harmony (see Sangiovanni, 2015; Featherstone, 2012). Consequently, the memory-activism nexus, which highlights memory in action, calls our attention to memory's role in the formation of political solidarity as joint action, rather than as social cohesion.

David Featherstone (2012: 5) provides a succinct definition of political solidarity as "a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression." Featherstone's (2012: 245) emphasis on solidarity as a political practice characterises solidarity as an "inventive, generative" act of forging transformative relations, an active process of "world-making," which does not prescribe a single form of unity or we-ness. Following this, a focus on the "worldmaking" aspects of cultural remembrance rather than on its sole "memory-making" function (Erll, 2011: 144) opens possibilities to observe how memory in action forges political relations through struggle and creative practices that reimagine a we-ness beyond similitude. In what follows, I take my cue from Featherstone's definition of political solidarity as I read Nihat Behram's articulation of a 'we' who remember and stand in solidarity. In the first section, where I analyse his self-reflective acts of remembrance, I demonstrate how he configures commemoration as an act of solidarity through weaving together a moral universe in which 'witnessing' redeems the past. In the second section, I show that Behram's conception of solidarity witness was not restricted to a moral view of redeeming the past, but also emerged in socialist struggle which he joined through acts of self-sacrifice.

The Self-Reflective Remembrance of the 'Three Saplings'

When it comes to the relationship between cultural production, memory, and political contention in Turkey, it is difficult to overstate the influence of *Three Saplings on the Gallows*. Undergoing its 125th print in the form of a commemorative hardcover edition for the 50th anniversary of the executions in 2022, Behram's book is a quantifiable success story. The book's title, which foregrounded the youthfulness of Gezmiş, Aslan, and İnan by creating the metonym 'three saplings,' is still used to refer to the three revolutionaries in commemoration marches, protest ephemera, and anniversary journalism that reports on the executions and their commemoration each year (Şeşen, 2016; Erbil, 2022).

What makes *Three Saplings on the Gallows* such a compelling touchstone is that it was essentially an argument for lawfulness against 'unlawful' legal trials. It was a retroactive defence of the 'three saplings' that challenged the legitimacy of the death sentences handed down by martial law. It sought justice through legal reporting and *bearing witness* to the innocence of the young men, as Behram compiled court documents and legal expert testimonies to contest the legitimacy of the executions, and in this sense, it was journalism that drew on cause lawyering.[3] In addition, Behram's literary witnessing of the lives of the young men and their early death, which re-enacted their experience in a melodramatic mode, generated the emotional appeal of the legal argument for their innocence (Erbil, 2022: 124). Yet beyond making the legal argument more appealing and intelligible, he also established *bearing witness* to their lives as a political practice through self-reflections on his own remembrance practice. Remembering the 'three saplings' in Behram's auto/biographical narration is presented as being a witness at the 'court of history,' which allows him to position his self as a solidarity witness to the persecution of the socialist movement.

Behram's memory work exceeds the legal episteme of the lawyers he includes in his narrative because he combines witnessing as legal journalism with literary witnessing. His work is not confined by a mainstream journalistic discourse that assumes the position of an objective mediator. The back cover frames the book through the interplay between objective journalistic witnessing and subjective, affective witnessing. Behram begins his back cover introduction from the subject position of a journalist who "Documents … The opinions of the lawyers on the case" (Behram, 1976). These short, sharp, and factual lines draw on the ethos of document-based journalistic reporting and legal expert testimonies. Yet Behram's speaking position subsequently shifts dramatically to that of a "moral witness" (Margalit, 2002):

> With the first light of the morning of May 6, their last night, their last words, their last letters spread in waves to the ranks of the revolutionary struggle. It was a fact everyone knew that Denizes [*sic*] stood uncompromisingly in the face of death and marched to the gallows with a sense of steel. Only the task of documenting the facts of their lives unharmed in the memory of the broad masses remained open. In the 4th year of their demise, I took on this task. I wrote THREE SAPLINGS ON THE GALLOWS, WITH THE CANDID HELP OF THEIR BEST FRIENDS, FAMILIES

> AND LAWYERS. I told each person I consulted for information that I felt it was my debt of honour to tell the public "the memories of Denizes without damaging, without taking any account outside the interests of the revolutionary struggle, without censorship and with all due dignity". Because it would be disgrace and rascality to damage their last breath. (Behram, 1976, emphasis in original)[4]

When combined with revolutionary struggle, words like truth, duty, honour, debt and dignity organise a discourse of revolutionary morals, whereby the author is obliged to uncover the injustice dealt to the 'three saplings' without "damaging" their memory (Behram, 1976). Behram is called on to stand as a witness, not by institutions but by moral duty. His sense of solidarity with the dead motivates him to uncover the 'truth' about the past, which is supported by many others who act in solidarity with Behram in this endeavour. This collaboration, or joint action, further compels his allegiance to the memory of the 'three saplings,' strengthening his solidarity with the dead.

Behram's back cover introduction provides a framework for solidarity, in which revolutionary unity morally compels Behram to bear witness to the lives and deaths of his comrades, much in line with the theological conception of witnessing[5] as "means to see and testify to God's will" (Russo, 2018: 21). On the other hand, his journalistic register offers verifiable truth. It is possible to map the two witness subject positions that Behram employs onto Avishai Margalit's (2002: 168) classification of ideal witness types in the pursuit of "uncovering the evil": the "political witness," who uncovers the factual truth through "temperament and training," "telling it like it was," and the "moral witness," who provides an account of personal suffering, "telling it like it felt," which ascribes "intrinsic value to his testimony, no matter what the instrumental consequences of it are going to be" (2002: 167). This parallels the distinction between the instrumental uses of memory in activism and memory activism, which attributes intrinsic value to remembrance as redeeming the past. If we take these ideal witness types as subject positions rather than as philosophical categories, we see that Behram mobilises the two subject positions of the political and the moral witness. Whereas the first aims to uncover the truth through document-based journalism, the latter conceptualises the witness narrative as a revolutionary moral duty. Being a moral witness enhances Behram's credibility as a revolutionary, for he fulfils his duty to remember and provides an affective appeal to his readers. This subject position calls

on his public to bear witness alongside him, in solidarity, by attributing intrinsic value to the act. His political witness position thus highlights the instrumental uses of this solidarity as joint action that unfolds in a struggle against legal persecution.

Behram emphasises the sociality of bearing witness to suggest an intrinsic link between solidarity and witnessing by memorialising the 'three saplings.' The "candid help" of the intimate circle of the revolutionaries—their friends and fathers whom Behram interviews—and Behram's demonstration of loyalty to their trust enhance his credibility as a moral witness (Behram, 1976). This moral credibility is offered as evidence that the reader can trust him and stand in solidarity with him. Furthermore, his moralistic presentation of the "duty to remember" the dead revolutionaries "with all due dignity" establishes remembering the 'three saplings' as a moral imperative for his public too (Behram, 1976). By attributing political and moral value to the act of remembering, Behram implicitly invites his readers to join him in the position of the solidarity witness.

Of course, the reader's willingness to join Behram's act of solidarity witnessing depends on his credibility as a narrator who uncovers the truth. He negotiates his credibility by switching between the political and moral witness subject positions throughout the book, emphasising his apparent objectivity alongside his personal loyalty to the revolutionaries. He speaks as an objective journalist as he provides scenes and quotes from the trial or other testimonies he gathered through interviews: "The 1st THKO trial was concluded at the No. 1 Military Court and the death sentence was given for 18 young people. … Ağırnaslı tells his memories of his meeting with İnönü" (Behram, 1976: 45). In declarative sentences like this, a journalistic ethos of objectivity marks the narrative. However, Behram also employs a poetic voice to make his evidential journalism more intelligible and affective:

> There is such a moment when a life becomes a symbol of an emotion. It merges with that feeling. Its meaning deepens.
>
> It is something that is wanted to be split in two by death. Some cling to the ranks of keeping alive, some lie in ambush to kill, and seek the darkest ways to take life.
>
> This is how history came to be. In a way, the world is the place where the desire to live and death collide. The meaning of the laws of society is also knotted in it. Some don't want that knot to be untied; some are willing to die so that the knot will be undone, and society will be relieved. (1976: 7)[6]

These opening lines of the first essay in the book provide a frame narrative for the memorialisation of the executed revolutionaries. Behram introduces the reader to the moral universe of good and evil and life and death, which determine the laws of history. Laconic, aphoristic statements or metaphors formulate moral truth claims in this section. A parable in which numerous babies are born into a dysfunctional world follows:

> And hunger awaits most of them: treachery, suffering, exploitation … And some of them start to think. He thinks, and the more he thinks, the more he becomes brave, fearless, conscious … He bows to the sufferings of his people. He gives hope.
>
> The hope of the people is like a river. And some waters feed that river. (1976: 7–8)[7]

Throughout sequences such as these, consisting of moral truth claims about what is right and wrong, Behram's objective voice recedes into the background. By offering his subjective perspective, he fosters intimacy with his implied reader, the 'suffering people' who cultivate hope, thanks to the heroes who stand against evil. This intimacy aims to foster trust and strengthen stranger sociality amongst the public to which Behram appeals. His address constitutes a call for a joint act of solidarity witnessing, in which solidarity marks the relationship among the witnesses as much as it is a solidarity with the heroes. As such, his description of heroic self-sacrifice resonates with the "cult of ancestors" that Ernest Renan (2018: 261) identifies as a resource for a nation as "a vast solidarity." However, Behram's vision of solidarity has no trace of similitude and social cohesion that marks national solidarity. Rather, he aims to generate trust as a resource for the solidarity between him and his reader.

As he slowly reveals that *hope* is the affect symbolised by certain lives, Behram weaves a moral universe of good versus evil, in which martyrs are martyred because they personify hope. He concludes: "Our world has known those who stand unbending on the brink of death for their beliefs since its existence. Because some dead are of the world" (Behram, 1976: 8).[8] He then embarks on his memory work relating to the dead who belong to the world, to 'the people.' He refers to Sacco and Vanzetti, the Italian-American anarchists who were executed by electric chair in 1927, six nameless martyrs in Spain, the Vietnamese revolutionary martyr Nguyen Van Troi and his wife Quyen, and finally, the first martyr of Turkey's 1968, Vedat Demircioğlu, thus linking this storyline to the 'three

saplings.' The remembrance and enumeration of these 'martyrs' does not constitute journalistic or historiographical documentation. His subject position of the moral witness structures a different mnemonic discourse in which remembering martyrs is framed as remembering hope—hope for a revolution yet to come. The past is suggestive of the terrain of possibilities. Hope, therefore, resides in the knowledge that there have always been dedicated revolutionaries willing to sacrifice their lives for their people. Provided that the reader steps into the position of the solidarity witness and remembers the martyrs, there always will be. Behram's appeal to his public promises the cultivation of this hope.

Despite these poetic statements that attribute moral meaning to remembrance, Behram's first publisher May classified the book as "Science / Document / Research" due to its framing of political witnessing as objective truth-seeking. His world-making or creation of a worldview where political relations unfold in revolutionary struggle also serves the real-world struggle against injustice. Behram presents a research question in his opening essay that frames the entire narrative as investigative journalism: "Yes, their verdict was executed, but was their crime in accord with the sentence given the existing laws?" (1976: 13).[9] But objective truth-seeking remains adjacent to moral truths in the narrative. Right after the framing of the book as a journalistic *exposé*, we encounter a poem titled "These days that…" This is the first of 13 elegiac and agitative revolutionary poems by Behram in the collection, each following separate essays. In the elegiac discourse of the poems, the poet adopts the voice of a sentimental revolutionary, and sometimes the poetic persona of the "lover," which is a well-rooted tradition in Turkish and Ottoman poetry and is not confined to romance, exclaiming: "We kiss their hearts in these lamentations" (*Onların kalbini öpüyoruz ağlayışlarda*) (Behram, 1976: 16). While the *exposé* discourse conducts journalistic memory work, the poems aim to ignite revolutionary sentiments and mobilise affective memory *in* activism.

As Behram switches between the positions of moral witness and political witness, he weaves a mnemonic discourse that is complex and sometimes contradictory: one shall remember the 'martyrs' to remember the hope they embody; remember them to mourn their deaths; witness the injustice dealt to them as victims of martial law; or witness the illegitimacy of legal procedures within a traumatised democracy. In all these different discourses of remembrance with differing ends, 'memory' is established as a site of contentious politics: remembrance is resistance, claim-making, showing solidarity, aligning with the revolutionaries, protecting

democracy, and so on. When Behram speaks as a moral witness, his solidarity with the dead and his revolutionary duty compels him to bear witness, and when he assumes the verifiable voice of the political witness, his bearing witness is truth-seeking for the collective pursuit of justice. The combination formulates a political subjectivity, a cultural model of political personhood, that is intelligible to the reader, thanks to Behram's narrative strategies: the solidarity witness who partakes in the joint action of remembering the 'three saplings.'

Perhaps the most explicit instance of this formation is in the last lines of Behram's (1976: 160) final essay, which closes the narrative part of the book before the expert testimonies:

> Their virtues our guide;
> May their memories be a light on our path...[10]

The wish for the memory of the martyrs to bear the revolutionary torch relies on the discourse of the immortality of the 'martyr.' It intersects with the discourse of revolutionary endurance shared by 'us,' the book's public, who bears witness to the martyrs. Remembering the martyrs is revolutionary because it is an act of closing ranks with them in a collective fight. This truth claim, which proposes witnessing as a foundation for solidarity with the dead, thus opens up space for the solidarity witness within revolutionary discourse. Through engaging in solidarity witnessing, the reader can partake in joint struggle.

Behram's Embodiment of Solidarity

While Behram's narrative strategies establish solidarity witnessing as a form of political contention, the 'solidarity witness' ceases to be a literary abstraction when the author suffers the consequences of this political act. Hence, we find Behram's own life narrative written into the book as evidence of his memory work as solidarity work.

In the memory work of his contemporary publisher, which articulates the memory of the three revolutionaries with Behram's self-sacrifice, we also find traces of the legal risks Behram took to demonstrate solidarity with his book's subjects. Behram's vision of solidarity, one that marks his self-reflective acts of remembrance, also implicated him in the crimes of the lives he memorialised. He was targeted for his defence of the executed, which in turn inspired others, like Behram's publishers, to profess

solidarity with Behram and memorialise his self-sacrifice. Throughout the decades of its publication, *Three Saplings on the Gallows* has become a palimpsest of memory work. While Behram commemorates the 'three saplings,' his publishers memorialise the persecution of Behram himself in newer editions of the book. The current publisher of Behram, Everest, includes historical evidence of the legal persecution of the author, such as newspaper clippings, at the end of the narrative. While expanding the archive of court documents that the book initially drew on, this practice writes Behram himself into the memory of the socialist movement as a solidarity witness and an implicated revolutionary.

According to the blurb on the book's first edition, *Three Saplings on the Gallows* was initially published as an 18-day series of essays for the newspaper *Vatan* in May 1976, on the fourth anniversary of the execution, to "document the truths about their lives in the memories of masses" (Behram, 1976). But we learn from Everest's memorialisation in the later editions that this was not a typical newspaper serialisation. Due to the criminalisation of the commemoration of Deniz Gezmiş, Yusuf Aslan, and Hüseyin İnan, the newspaper's managing editor did not take legal responsibility for the page on which the series was published, Behram did. As the Everest editors note, this was "a rare practice in the history of the press" (in Behram, 2006: 201). The prosecutor of Behram's case later framed this practice as *evidence* of Behram's intention to commit a deliberate crime in doing memory work (Bostancı, 1998). For the socialist movement, it continues to evidence political solidarity and self-sacrifice.

In court, Nihat Behram's articles and poems in this series were worthy of a hundred-year prison sentence because he was the "responsible manager" of *Vatan's* single page where he wrote about the THKO Case (Behram, 2006: 201). However, the formation of this autonomous textual space did not stop the newspaper's editors from reporting on Behram's legal persecution. Everest's inclusion of a newspaper clipping shows that *Vatan* editors showed solidarity by calling Behram "our writer" (Behram, 2006: 201).[11] When the series ended, *Vatan* gifted its readers a poster of the three revolutionaries along with an epic poem by Behram called "Çarpışarak" (Clashingly) as a supplement to their daily print and in response to readers' requests for poster-size photographs of the revolutionaries (Behram, 2006: 201-202). The editors also published an announcement regarding the end of the series titled "A Statement and Appreciation." It stated that the poster was requested by their "democrat, progressive, patriotic, revolutionary readers," who showed they were

"brothers in arms" (*omuzdaş*) in "Vatan's struggle" (Behram, 2006: 201). In addition to this address recognising the public's solidarity with them, they even referred to the three revolutionaries by their first names, Deniz, Yusuf, and Hüseyin, demonstrating a close affinity with the executed. Although this treatment by the newspaper framed the popularity of the series as a testament to the readers' solidarity with 'Vatan's struggle' against the 12 March regime, the solidarity that Behram forged in the political struggle gained more resonance for his public in later decades. While his memory work succeeded in building a political alliance, this achievement turned into the memory of hope in his current publisher's memorialisation of this act of solidarity.

Celebrating 'Vatan's struggle,' however, was not the endpoint of Behram's solidarity work and the poster was not the only memorabilium of this eventful commemoration. As soon as the series ended, *Three Saplings on the Gallows* was published in book form and was immediately in high demand. Although readers already had access to the newspaper articles, the book's first edition had six prints in the first month (Bostancı, 1998). It was a bestseller: "Cağaloğlu slope witnessed booksellers lining up in front of May Publications to buy the book before it was banned" (Bostancı, 1998). The book sold well and fast, partly because people wanted to buy it before it was banned, which is counterintuitive given that possession of the book could be used as criminal evidence of the reader's implication in Behram's and the revolutionaries' crimes. Buying the book itself was a form of risk-sharing, involving the consumer in the political struggle it memorialised.

In 1976, having read the narrative in the newspaper was not enough to belong to Behram's public of solidarity witnesses. The writing had to become a transportable and dynamic memorial object, a "portable monument" to be "carried over into new situations" (Rigney, 2004: 383). Having undergone several bans and even a title change, and more importantly, as a monument to Behram's self-sacrifice in later editions, the book transformed into a portable and dynamic monument to leftist solidarity.

The material circulation of the book in the commodity market was also unconventional. Behram donated his entire revenue to the prison chapters of the persecuted revolutionary organisations to materially support their struggle (Bostancı, 1998). This was no secret as Behram announced this decision on the back cover, thus informing people that buying a copy meant supporting the criminalised movement. In solidarity with the socialist movement through and through, *Three Saplings on the Gallows* was not

published for profit. It was instead a medium through which the cultural remembrance of the lives of the 'three saplings' brought together the defeated dissenters to support each other at the beginning of a new cycle of mobilisation in 1976. Hence, it was a monument to solidarity, which unfolded in a historically situated political struggle. Even this economic dimension of the book is memorialised in Everest's contemporary edition, which includes visual evidence of donations in the form of facsimiles of receipts.

Everest's memorialisation of this economic solidarity further shows that Behram framed these donations as a means of reciprocating the prisoners' contributions in-kind. Although these receipts are reduced in size and laid on top of each other in the photograph Everest includes, one of them stands out more clearly than the others. It states that the receiver, Kutsiye Bozoklar, was paid copyright for her "memories and photographs that were used in the writing of *Three Saplings on the Gallows*" (Behram, 2006: 203). Yet the 'memories' shared with Behram were not commodities that Behram put in his book and paid for. Instead, the receipt in the current editions implies that the book was a collective project of bearing witness in solidarity. Its inclusion in the book also memorialised Kutsiye Bozoklar, a poet and journalist herself, who spent two years in prison after being paralysed in a police clash that ended with the death of a comrade. Therefore, the book's paratextual surround further memorialised the movement, associating many names with that of the 'three saplings' and establishing solidarity witnessing as joint action.

Three Saplings on the Gallows gave Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan, and Yusuf Aslan their metonymic name and rendered them memorable as the 'three saplings,' not only because of its content but also because of the book's contentious afterlife. As Zekai Bostancı (1998) summarises in his celebration of the book's release from censorship and return to the shelves in 1998, Behram himself has become one of the most prominent symbols of the persecution of socialist literature in Turkey. Following a significant number of lawsuits filed against him for his writings, he left Turkey in 1980 to escape the coup d'état. He was stripped of citizenship in 1985 and regained it only in 1996. Nevertheless, he was arrested at the airport upon his return from exile because of a new lawsuit against *Three Saplings on the Gallows*. He was released, but in 1997, when he visited Turkey to prepare a new edition, he was arrested at the airport once again. During the two-decade-long struggle to commemorate the 'three saplings,' he was supported by many, including one of the lawyers of the THKO Case.

The story of the book has gained as much importance as the story it initially told, making not only the 'three saplings' but also its author memorable revolutionaries. In his late 70s, Behram continued his solidarity work as a member of the Communist Party of Turkey (Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP), reciting his poems to inspire others to join the socialist fight at party events. His previous solidarity work and its memorialisation in this portable monument continue to enhance the credibility of his new calls for solidarity.

Conclusion

Over decades, *Three Saplings on the Gallows* gained the status of a 'portable monument' that both inspired and evidenced revolutionary solidarity, as solidarity ceased to be mere abstraction through Behram's self-sacrifice and the entanglement of his life narrative with those whom he commemorated. In addition to being a 'portable monument' itself, the book lends its name to actual monuments and monumental parks where local governments in Turkey take up activist memory work against the national government.[12] Besides commemorating Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan, and Yusuf Aslan, these parks and monuments also memorialise Behram's solidarity witnessing, even if implicitly. Such canonicity in Turkey's left-wing memory culture, I aimed to show, can be explained through the book's configuration of memory and political solidarity.

Three Saplings on the Gallows is not the only book that commemorates the lives of Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin İnan, and Yusuf Aslan. Gezmiş in particular features in many examples of life writing, which are often dismissed as mere "hagiography" (see Pekesen, 2020; Yenen, 2019; Gölz, 2019). There is indeed a literary tradition of commemorating the revolutionary 'martyrs' in Turkey, but by and large, these texts do not receive scholarly attention. The emergent interest in the memory-activism nexus opens new possibilities to view these books in a different light. Reading these accounts as relational life writing and for their auto/biographicality can illuminate the entanglements of lives of those who are remembered and those who remember, shedding light on the various motivations for producing the cultural memory of the same 'martyrs.' For Behram, the source of his motivation for memorialising the lives of the 'three saplings' was his vision of solidarity, which marks his own life. In Behram's practice, life writing as activist memory work becomes solidarity work as it joins collective action, forging solidarities that unfold in that struggle.[13]

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Notes

1. In the canon of the sociological work on solidarity, Stijn Oosterlynck et al. (2017: 5) identify four distinct sources of solidarity: interdependence, shared norms and values, struggle, and encounter. Collective memory, in this delineation, corresponds to the construction of shared norms and values.
2. Kékesi and Zombory's (2023) critique takes Michael Rothberg's (2009: 5) "multidirectional memory" as a representative theory in this regard. Rothberg indeed offers a cultural remembrance model of cross-referencing the assumedly distinct memories of political violence as having "the potential to create new forms of solidarity." A similar emphasis on "solidarity across difference" can be observed in the conceptualisation of "mnemonic solidarity" (Lim & Rosenhaft, 2021), which is a model of global memory formation to forge solidarity across racial or geographical divides.
3. As I discuss elsewhere (Erbil, 2022), this form of memory activism through juridical discourses was first employed by one of the lawyers of the case, Halit Çelenk, who publicised the court files in 1974 to argue against the legitimacy of the death sentences in his book *1. THKO Case (Court File)* (*1. THKO Davası (Mahkeme Dosyası)*). Drawing on the availability of this legal record and joining Çelenk's activism, Behram further disseminated this legal discussion in 1976 with additional expert testimonies. He also made the judicial discourse more intelligible to the general public through an affective and moral framing of the innocence of youth (Erbil, 2022: 123–124).
4. The original reads: "6 Mayıs sabahının ilk aydınlığı ile birlikte onların son geceleri, son sözleri, son mektupları devrimci mücadelenin saflarına dalga dalga yayıldı. Denizgilin, ölüm karşısında ödünsüz dikilişleri ve Çelik bir duygu ile darağacına yürüyüşleri, herkesin bildiği bir gerçekti. Sadece, onların hayatları ile ilgili gerçeklerin, geniş kitlelerin belleğinde zedesizce belgelenmesi görevi açıkta durmaktaydı. öldürülüşlerinin 4. yılında bu görevi yüklendim. EN YAKIN ARKADAŞLARI, AILELERI VE AVUKATLARININ IÇTEN YARDIMIYLA, DARAĞACINDA ÜÇ FIDAN'ı yazdım. bilgisine başvurduğum her kişiye ayrı ayrı "Denizlerin anılarını, zedelemeksizin, devrimci mücadelenin çıkarı dışında bir hesap gözetmeksizin, sansürsüz ve olanca saygınlığı içinde" halka anlatmayı namuslu borcu bildiğimi söyledim. Çünkü onların son nefeslerini zedelemek, namussuzluk ve şerefsizlik olurdu."

5. In "Witness as a Cultural Form of Communication", Günter Thomas (2009: 92) shows that witnessing has interconnected historical roots in law and religion and argues that new formats of witnessing can be traced back to these roots (105). Thomas (2009: 105) suggests that journalism's witnessing paradigm can be traced back to the legal format of forensic witnessing, which corresponds to Margalit's (2002) conceptualisation of the "political witness." The "moral witness," in contrast, resonates with the theological conceptions of justice and witnessing.
6. The original reads: "Öyle bir an vardır ki, bir can, bir duygunun simgesi olur. Bütünleşir o duyguyla. Anlamı derinleşir.

   Ölümle ikiye bölünmek istenen bir şeydir bu. Kimisi yaşatmanın saflarında kenetlenir, kimisi öldürmek için pusuya yatar; en karanlık yollarını arar can almanın.

   Tarih böyle oluşa gelmiştir. Bir bakıma yaşama arzusuyla, ölümün çarpıştığı yerdir dünya. Toplum yasalarının anlamı da bunun içinde düğümlüdür. Kimisi o düğüm çözülmesini ister; kimisi çözülsün düğüm, toplum ferahlasın diye, can vermeyi göze alır..."
7. The original reads: "Ve onların büyük kesimini açlık beklemektedir; kalleşlikler, acılar, sömürü … Ve içlerinden bazıları düşünmeye başlar. Düşünür ve düşündükçe yiğitlenir, korkusuzlanır, bilinçlenir … Eğilir halkının acılarına. Umut verir.

   Halkın umudu bir nehre benzer. Ve o nehri besleyen sular vardır."
8. The original reads: "İnançları uğruna ölümün eşiğinde bükülmeden duranları, varolalı beri tanır dünyamız. Çünkü bazı ölüler dünyanındır."
9. The original reads: "Evet, onlara biçilen hükümü infaz edildi, fakat varolan yasalar karşısındaki suçları, hükümle uyum halinde miydi?"
10. The original reads: "Erdemleri rehberimiz; / Anıları yolumuza ışık olsun…"
11. While the newspaper did not hesitate to show solidarity with Behram in 1976, they could no longer take that risk the next year. In a Nihat Behram profile, Zekai Bostancı (1998) states that the newspaper fired him on the day of the 1977 Bloody May Day because of severe disagreements about how to report on the event. The newspaper wanted to frame the massacre as a Maoist vs. Leninist clash like other newspapers, but Behram, having survived the massacre as an eyewitness, insisted on reporting on the shots fired on the crowd from above tall buildings, which meant the massacre was not a conflict among leftists but an attack on them. Eventually, after the newspaper fired Behram, another prominent writer quit in solidarity, and *Vatan* lost their readership.
12. There are numerous monuments and parks named after the 'three saplings': the first "Three Saplings Monument" (*Üç Fidan Anıtı*) was made by sculptor Eşber Karayalçın and placed in Nilüfer Youth Park in 2010 as part of five Thematic Parks and Forests (*Tematik Parklar ve Ormanlar*) insti-

tuted by Nilüfer Municipality in Bursa. In 2018, Gaziemir Municipality of Izmir opened the Three Saplings Park with a Three Saplings Monument. Güzelbahçe of Izmir and Yenişehir of Mersin instituted their own "Three Saplings Monument" in 2022, and Adana's Çukurova opened their "Three Saplings Memorial Park" (*Üç Fidan Anıt Parkı*) in 2023. Google Maps marks two "Three Saplings" parks in Ankara, and another one in Antalya.

13. The author would like to thank Ann Rigney, Anna Poletti, Clara Vlessing, and Eamonn Connor for their thoughts and advice on earlier drafts, Sophie van den Elzen for sharing her unpublished work, and Thomas van Gaalen for his thought-provoking observations on international solidarity.

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CHAPTER 6

Writing Louise Michel: The Formation and Development of a Mythologised Revolutionary

Clara Vlessing

Introduction

The death of French anarchist Louise Michel (1830–1905) prompted instant quarrels between groups of her supporters about how best to commemorate her many years of extraordinary political struggle and agitation (Verhaeghe, 2021b). Should there be a funeral? Might a statue be erected to celebrate Michel's life? Who should take on the responsibility of preserving her political legacy? Or, to put this another way, who were her rightful heirs? Pitching into these debates shortly after her death in 1905, the anarchist writer Sébastien Faure declared: "Louise Michel belongs to no one" (*Louise Michel n'est à personne*) (quoted in Galera, 2016: 67). Or, as recorded in another, less snappy, version: "Louise Michel did not only belong to anarchy, but to the entire Revolution, regardless of the paths that led to it" (*Louise Michel n'appartenait pas seulement à l'anarchie, mais à la Révolution toute entière, sans se soucier des chemins qui y mènent*)

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(quoted in Rétat, 2017: 19).[1] Shorthand or not, Faure's message is clear: he believes that Louise Michel transcends appropriation; her memory stands for an idea of generalised revolution that is greater than any one movement. Furthermore, Faure casts Michel's own politics as somehow embodying an oppositional impulse that supersedes distinctions between left-wing factions. In these quotes from 1905, Michel appears as she often does over a hundred years later: she is suggestively resonant yet curiously devoid of context, a representation of revolutionary fervour who stands outside of time, with a faint air of otherworldliness. No one owns Louise Michel, Faure suggests, because how could you own the revolution?

Statements like Faure's have dominated Michel's cultural "afterlives" (Rigney, 2012). As she is cast and recast as a saintly or superhuman figure, it is often suggested that some true version of Michel has been lost in the course of her repeated remediation. Michel, writes Lynn A. Higgins (1982: 213), tends to "fade from view under the weight of her legend." Yet, Michel's 'legend' was as much a feature of her reputation in life as it has been of her posthumous representation—albeit with a different set of associations. Those who remember her have drawn from narrative schemata established during Michel's lifetime and developed in the subsequent hundred-plus years. In considering Michel's changing cultural remembrance over time, this chapter follows this collection's identification of intersubjectivity as an essential aspect of the remembrance of contentious lives. It shows the ways in which remembering subjects (see Erbil in this collection) draw from their own experiences and the representational forms available to them at a given historic moment, and how this process shapes Michel's remembrance. It demonstrates how Michel's appeal to successive remembering subjects is characterised by mythologising descriptions of her exceptionality and her ability to both transcend and transpose definitional borders between reality and imagination.

Michel's Mythologisation

In his landmark work on mythologisation, Roland Barthes (2006: 10) refers to myth as a "language," a mode of communication or type of speech, defined by its form rather than by its content. It is iterative: a story becomes a myth through a repeated representational process in which certain fictitious aspects are crystallised. But it is also unstable: objects, people or ideas may move in and out of myth. In Barthes's description, a myth is defined by the ideological purposes for which it is used, mostly serving to

prop up the needs of those in power. Myths, he argues, are presented as natural and normal: their origins and the political motivations that govern their circulation are largely hidden. Myths stand outside of time and as such are both abstractive and associative, forming connections between different schemata. Building on Barthes's emphasis on mythologisation as a process, I argue that mythologisation implies an extension, the broadening out of a particular characterisation so that it loses a level of historical specificity and gains a superlative and exemplary function. As such, mythologisation is a mode of meaning-making that is particularly available to those remembering the lives of politically active subjects who were guided by and have become associated with specific principles or ideals.

As discussed in the collection's introduction, the remembrance of contentious lives often serves the political needs of those remembering them. In Michel's case, her lifelong radicalism entails that her remembrance is often explicitly mythologised to bolster political ideas or causes. Claims about Michel's extraordinary morality, courage and wisdom act to legitimise the ideological commitments of a remembering subject. As a figure of memory, she acquires a symbolic and heroic function, providing a paradigm through which others can frame their actions, and offers opportunities for identification while simultaneously evincing unattainability and mystery.

The abstraction involved in this process is compounded by Michel's identification as a woman, embodying a wider tendency whereby, while the male form is used to depict individuals, the female form has often been perceived as "generic and universal, with symbolic overtones" (Warner, 1996: 12). In this way, Michel holds something in common with Brydie Kosmina's (2023: 86) recent identification of the witch as a productive figure for feminist activism: "a 'created myth,' but a useful one." Like the figure of the witch, Michel is represented in both vilified and sanctified guises. She is routinely either celebrated as an *exceptional woman* or seen as rising above rigid categories associated with gender, the latter construction owing much to the prevalence of the Joan of Arc myth in French culture (Warner, 2016).

Rather than seeking to disentangle a 'real' Michel from an imagined form, this chapter sets out to expose the rhetorical techniques which build up Michel's symbolic potential through a reciprocal exchange between 'history' and 'myth,' discursively framed as real and/or imagined. A dynamic of knowability/unknowability plays a central role in her remembrance. Represented simultaneously as both an individual woman and the

'embodiment of the revolution,' Michel's case indicates the constitutive part played by the interplay between the historic and imagined in the recollection of contentious lives and, in particular, the lives of politically contentious women. Her cultural remembrance progresses through an interaction between creative possibility and factual legitimacy, which is largely arbitrated by truth-claims authorised through her own autobiographical and historical writing.

Louise Michel's cultural afterlives demonstrate the palimpsestic way in which contentious lives are remembered. Taking a "path-dependent" (Jansen, 2007: 961) approach—paying attention to the ways in which the representational choices available to remembering subjects are bound by the previous uses to which a historic figure has been put—I will show how Michel has been remembered through an intermedial interaction between life writing (written by herself and by others) and a range of other media. This argument highlights the necessity of seeing life writing as part of a network of plurimedial representations that make up the cultural afterlives of contentious individuals, across different, in this case mythologising, framings.

This chapter engages with this collection's wider inquiry, outlined in the introduction, into the forms, techniques, plots and schemata through which lives become stories. It looks at the stories told by individual texts and at those that operate on a larger scale and come to define an individual's cultural memory. It illustrates how details in discrete mediations feed into and are informed by the *long durée* remembrance of an unequivocally contentious life. Following an outline of Michel's life, my argument begins with an analysis of the representational work of Michel's contemporary detractors and acolytes, in conversation with her own writing, in the form of memoirs. It demonstrates how Michel's imaginings of her own life creatively harness existing characterisations and associations to further her fantastical associations. I go on to show how Michel's ongoing remembrance depends on the availability of several highly gendered tropes (from Amazonian warrior to pious nurturer), which she is both fitted into and transcends. The final part of the chapter establishes the use of a related but diverging set of tropes—as an exceptional historic woman or proto-feminist—that appear in subsequent life writing, showing how the valence of Michel's cultural afterlives changes more broadly over time.

Michel's Life and Myth

Even the earliest accounts of Louise Michel's life, including her own, encode fantastical elements into her 'biography,' so that the story of her life is inherently connected to the formation of her myth.[2] Some moments of her life become notable chapters in her journey to becoming a revolutionary hero, whereas others are disregarded or obscured. The effect is often to render her ahistorical, appearing to exist outside of time. The following outline of the main events of her life aims to give the reader some familiarity with Michel's story and to show the ways in which details have subsequently been highlighted or passed over.

Born in a château in Vroncourt, a village in the North-East of France, on 29 May 1830, Michel was the daughter of a serving maid and, by most accounts, the son of the château's proprietors. Following a childhood marked by a tension between the full and wide-ranging education that she received and the narrow range of opportunities available to her, she left Vroncourt at the age of 21 and began teaching at small primary schools within the region. She became interested in radical teaching methods and was drawn to Paris, where she set up her own day school. In Paris, Michel developed a growing fascination with atheism and natural history, and embraced a loosely defined socialism, which focused on the power of the masses to bring about change and emphasised the cruel subjugation of domestic workers. During the Prussian siege of the city in 1870, she provided medical support for the wounded and besieged. A year later, on 18 March, she was among a group of women who faced down army troops sent from Versailles to suppress a people's militia—an action which precipitated the beginning of the Paris Commune. During the months in which the people of Paris governed the city, Michel appears to have been everywhere: in the oratory clubs giving speeches, at the hospitals tending to the wounded and on the barricades defending the city. At the end of the Commune, Michel was arrested and tried for a litany of charges. She offered herself as a sacrifice to the Commune's cause—reportedly stating "if you are not cowards, kill me!" (*si vous n'êtes pas des lâches, tuez-moi!*)—but, fearing that her execution might make her a martyr, the judges instead condemned Michel to exile in the French colony of New Caledonia.

Through conversation with fellow exiles on the boat to New Caledonia, Michel came to embrace the anarchist politics which would define the rest of her life. During her time on the island, she became interested in the culture of the indigenous Kanaks and, unusually among the exiled French

Communards, was involved in the Kanaks' struggle against French imperialism. When she returned to France in 1880, Michel had a ready audience and she spent the next two decades speaking in tributes to the Commune, giving popular lectures across the country on a wide range of radical causes and publishing both historical and creative works of writing. Eventually, after repeated harassment by the authorities, Michel fled to London and, during the remaining years of her life, moved between Paris and London as well as giving speaking tours across Europe. In 1905, she died in Marseilles and was buried in the outskirts of Paris, following a large and well-attended public funeral. By that time, as Faure's comments at the start of this chapter attest, for many she had already attained a heroic status.

Witch or Angel: Louise Michel's Symbolic Availability

Michel's popularity and her availability as a capacious symbol were consolidated by the ways in which the press of her day, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, used her representation to articulate their political allegiances. Michel's symbolic association with the Paris Commune, as one of the few surviving Communards to have a longstanding public presence in France, played an essential part in her position as a political lightning conductor. In this associative connection between Michel and the Commune, Michel's case demonstrates the ready use of female figures for symbolic purposes. She is associated with or dissociated from different qualities according to changing perspectives on the Commune: from chaos, barbarism and danger; to morality, liberty and justice. At either end of this spectrum, details about Michel were extrapolated and exaggerated to fulfil the political purposes of anti-Communards or Communards. Arguably, these representations were not in themselves mythologising; Michel was still alive and able to contradict some of the more extreme claims made about her behaviour. But in drawing on legend and fantasy, as well as deeply seated prejudices, these extreme depictions go some way in explaining the ease with which she has since been so readily mythologised since.

Looking at such 'symbolic overtones' in the particular context of the Paris Commune, Gay L. Gullickson has traced the depiction of female Communards, observing that women's actions were immediately considered far more noteworthy than those of their male comrades. Female Communards were turned into targets for the expression of political and

moral judgements about the Commune's wider workings and existence so that they came to embody the successes or failures of the Commune itself—an observation which matches the consistency with which Michel was presented as the face of the Commune. Gullickson (1996: 12) identifies several prevailing stereotypes applied to the women of the Commune: "the innocent victim, the scandalous orator, the amazon warrior, and the ministering angel." Here, each caricature reflects positive and negative nineteenth-century judgements of appropriate ways for a woman to behave: the victim and angel are considered appropriate, natural and acceptable, whereas the orator or warrior is unnatural and unacceptable.

The recurrence of these stereotypes in the depiction of Michel demonstrates the lively battle over her image that occurred during her lifetime, providing a proxy for wider tensions between political factions. In the anti-Commune press, she tended to appear as a character akin to the stereotype of the "amazon warrior," which Gullickson (1996: 86) identifies as the epithet most regularly applied to the female defenders of the Commune. Visual and textual representations of Michel as violent and dangerous appeared throughout the decades following the Commune in more and less hostile publications, such as *Le Gaulois* (an antagonistic and conservative journal) or *Le Grelot* (a satirical republican publication) (Fig. 6.1).[3]

In keeping with a wider trend in the depiction of the women of the Commune, many of these images took an obsessive interest in Michel's looks.[4] Her propensity for violence was pathologised, and cartoonists and writers alike honed in on her 'unnatural' appearance and potential insanity. Although Michel was by this point a recognisable public figure, physical representations of her followed a particular series of tropes and types: her face appeared in a variety of distorted shapes, with wispy hair, thin lips, a large nose, sometimes even sharp bestial teeth. She was regularly depicted as an animal, often a she-wolf, focusing on both her physical appearance and her quasi-mystical presence as proof of her monstrous moral degeneracy and disregard for societal norms (see, the image from *Le Grelot* above). These images sought to show Michel's malign power as evidence of her perceived primitivity, sub-humanity and place outside contemporary society.

During the same period and at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Michel's supporters made use of a different set of gendered stereotypes—those more closely aligned with Gullickson's "ministering angel," fitting Michel into a maternal archetype. Michel appears in this guise in a

Fig. 6.1 *La mère (Louise) Michel.* 1881. *Le Grelot.* Illustration by Alfred Le Petit. Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg. (Public domain)

famous work by the painter Jules Girardet, who was vehemently pro-Commune. Girardet cited Michel and the Commune as his favourite subjects and produced a number of works that refer to central moments in Michel's life, using images that echo visual accounts of the lives of saints and showing the many trials and tribulations that Michel passed through on her path to greatness. His paintings, produced shortly after the Commune, chime with a version of Michel as a figure of intense morality, goodness and charity who would give up anything, even her life, for the people (Fig. 6.2). They have gone on to fuel ensuing and contemporary

Fig. 6.2 *L'Arrestation de Louise Michel*. 1871. Painting by Jules Girardet. Museé d'art et d'histoire de Saint-Denis. NA 2659. (Public domain)

imaginings of Michel as a saintly or deified figure: an idealised imagining of the innocent, feminised victim of anti-Communard violence.

Incorporating some of her reputation for resistance and violence, contemporaries frequently compared Michel to Joan of Arc, who stood for "the ideal expression of female virtue" (Warner, 2016: xv) and as a beacon for independence, adventure and courage. On her return from exile, the senior statesman Gambon led the crowd in "a round of applause for Louise, whom he compared to Joan of Arc" (Thomas, 2019: 172).

A letter from a comrade Michel received in Clermont prison compared her to Joan, writing that "[y]our great heart has bled for the misery of the people" (Thomas, 2019: 244). Like Joan, Michel emerges as a singular figure whose image is pulled in different directions. On the one hand, she eludes the conventional categories through which women might attain renown: "neither a queen, nor a courtesan, nor a beauty, nor a mother, nor an artist of one kind or another, nor—until the extremely recent date of 1920 when she [Joan of Arc] was canonized—a saint" (Warner, 2016: xxxvi). On the other hand, as Warner posits is so often the case with female figures, representations of Joan tend to revert to stereotypes: the Amazon, the knight errant, etc. The ideal of Joan of Arc amalgamates several appealing traits: she is undeniably female and yet has an intriguing tinge of androgyny. Her supposed virginity, also an aspect of Michel's story, protects her from many of the most negative characteristics applied to other women, and her cross-dressing functions as an indication of her singularity. Above all, Joan of Arc is exceptional, unbound from any given context: a mythological quality which is often also applied to Michel.

Comparisons between Michel and Joan of Arc go beyond their moral purity and courage. Joan's model of bravery and aggression has a distinctly oppositional flavour. Her ability to speak truth to power and act as a voice against corruption and inequality serves as a fundamental part of her myth. In Michel's trial, there is a self-conscious echo of Joan's, adding mythical weight to her potential self-sacrifice. In this way, as Michel Ragon (1999: 25) a more recent biographer notes, it is "impossible to not think of the trial of Joan of Arc when looking at Louise Michel's interrogation files" (*impossible de ne pas penser au procès de Jeanne d'Arc lorsque l'on dépouille le dossier des interrogatoires de Louise Michel*). His words echo almost a century of the same comparison. Joan provides character traits and narrative schemata that "premediate" (Erll & Rigney, 2009: 8) Michel's life. Already during her lifetime, Michel's status as a symbol of superhuman civil disobedience was produced by remembering subjects who related her person and actions to a series of mythical archetypes.

Humble Barbarian: Louise Michel's Memoirs

Such proximity to the imaginary and superlative was also characteristic of Michel's self-representation. Michel's 1886 memoirs, titled simply *Mémoires*, refute neither the positive nor negative elements of the tropes discussed in the previous section. Instead, she appropriates and takes

control over the available schemata to plot her own story. Michel's recording of her life provides a mainstay of her ensuing afterlives and stands as a creative "portable monument" (Rigney, 2004) to her political vision. Michel was an avid writer and, despite the fact that she saw herself as a poet first and foremost, her works have mostly been used as a historical record with limited attention to their political or aesthetic dimensions. For years, her history of the Paris Commune, *La Commune* (1898), sat alongside that of Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray's *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (1876) as one of the key eyewitness accounts. Alongside this history and her memoirs, Michel left behind a wealth of unpublished texts and, although much of her poetry and political writing has tended to take a back seat in her remembrance, many of these works are increasingly available from French publishers (Verhaeghe, 2021a).

Michel's autobiographical inscriptions record her past actions to inspire future political mobilisation. They assert her own agency and enable her to "claim the 'authority of experience' both explicitly and implicitly" (Smith & Watson, 2010: 27). Versions of her memoirs have been circulated publicly since their original publication, including in translation, and these works remain central to academic and historic endeavours to understand Michel's life and times. Although Michel (1997: 19) suggests that the very idea of writing her memoirs caused her "a reluctance similar to that one would feel undressing in public" (*une répugnance pareille à celle qu'on éprouverait à se déshabiller en public*), subsequent readers have pointed out that the memoirs provided Michel with an opportunity for the conscious construction of an ideologically consistent version of herself (Translators' Introduction, Michel, 1981: xiii). Countering rumours, for instance, that she secretly had money and took carriages through Paris, Michel's life writing strives to show her revolutionary consistency and demonstrates her self-consciousness about her legend and her legacy.

The memoirs tell a dramatic tale that defends their subject, framing her as a hero. Michel's life is not recounted chronologically, and factual episodes are consistently and randomly supplemented by lyrical descriptions or emotional poetry. Mirroring the hero's journey, the "narrating 'I'" (Smith & Watson, 2010: 29) divides Michel's life into a period of training and learning and one of action: "the first, all dreams and study; the second, all events" (*la première, toute de songe et d'étude; la seconde, toute d'événements*) (Michel, 1997: 17).[5] The memoirs were written during a prison sentence, offering an act of resistance against the incarceration, and shortly after the death of Michel's beloved mother, whose passing is

evoked throughout. They are emotionally charged, variably jubilant and despairing, and haunted by a grief that provides impetus and urgency to the narrative. Michel's very awareness of the passage of time is rooted in her mother's death: she tells the reader that she was young until that day (Michel, 1997: 77). Taking on the position of mourning daughter establishes Michel as an intimate and credibly suffering subject. Grief over her mother's death is mingled with mourning for the dead of the Commune and the siege of Paris, becoming as much political as personal.

As the focus moves swiftly between important episodes in Michel's life, an intensely nostalgic account of her past is never far from expressions of hope for the future. Michel depicts herself as a martyr to the revolution, who has suffered so that others can strive: "Now I am uninterested in life, everything is over, and I will be in the supreme battle (the one we give everything to) cold as death" (*Maintenant je suis désintéressée de la vie, tout est fini, et je serai dans le combat suprême (celui où nous donnerons tous) froide comme la mort*) (Michel, 1997: 73). The reference to battle reinforces Michel's reputation as a warrior or Amazon. To the extent that she writes as a historian, it is as one with clear future-facing designs, who sees her chronicling as part of a distinct effort to change the course of events to come by shaping how the past will be remembered.

The memoir's eclectic form promotes the muddying of distinctions between the real and the imagined that facilitated later readings of Michel as a legendary figure. Lyrical fantasies, both those that Michel consumes and those that she imagines, are intertwined with detail-oriented and "surprisingly accurate" (Translators' Introduction, Michel, 1981: xii) reports of events of public record. The emphasis on parallels between her story and myth or legend destabilises the historical certainty of Michel's statements. Michel's account of herself confuses and surpasses the boundaries of reality. She registers her early interest in folklore from the stories of her grandfather—"sometimes, recounting the great days, the epic struggles of the first Republic, he would speak passionately of the war of giants where, brave against brave, the whites and the blues would show each other how heroes die" (*tantôt, racontant les grands jours, les luttes épiques de la première République, il avait des accents passionnés pour dire la guerre de géants où, braves contre braves, les blancs et les bleus se montraient comment meurent les héros*) (Michel, 1997 : 28)—and tentatively places herself in the lineage of the wild women of Gaul: a positive reinterpretation of her depiction as an archaic or barbaric figure in the press, a figure whose lineage lies in a similar imagined 'middle-age' to Joan of Arc. Evoking Joan

of Arc in her poetry (Thomas, 2019: 27), Michel fuels her association with this figure.

With this close connection to the imaginary, Michel is often equivocal about the truthfulness of her own account, repeatedly reminding the reader of her own act of creation. "If I let my thoughts and my pen wonder," she writes, "we can agree that this is deserved" (*Si je prends pour ma pensée et ma plume le droit de vagabondage, on conviendra que je l'ai bien payé*) (Michel, 1997: 17). Her portrayal of her voyage to New Caledonia is told in particularly vivid and experimental terms: it includes an episode in which Michel sees a ship that she has already seen in her dreams, suggesting a fine line between the internal and external worlds of the memoirs.

Throughout the memoirs, Michel's anarchism is a constant, albeit more through a frequent call to action than as an integrated part of the story of her life. As such, the moments of political expression are light on theoretical detail and heavy on passionate manifesto. Again and again, the text returns in quasi-mystical, prophetic terms to the coming revolution. As in Faure's insistence that Michel stood for "the entire revolution," Michel constantly anticipates her central participation in an imminent uprising and frequently offers to sacrifice herself for the cause in the service of which she has lived her whole life.

Despite her growing reputation as one of the Commune's leaders, Michel's memoirs display a keen desire that she should be remembered as part of the collective rather than as the one in charge.[6] The memoirs maintain a fundamental sense of the collective over the individual as Michel continually highlights the central importance of other thinkers, activists and friends in her life. The effect is often multivocal, as Michel's own voice is entwined with accounts of speeches, newspaper reports, letters and manifestos written by other people. This polyphony renders Michel herself as a public presence, folding her story further into the earliest remembrance of the Paris Commune. In the relationship between this shared Michel and the portrayal of a specific image of Michel (as, for instance, a barbarian who loves the smell of cannon powder, see Michel, 1997: 176), the memoirs connect her heroic civic presence—her status as the face of the Commune—to an imagined version of her personal life.

Michel leads the way in the blending of the real and imagined that has subsequently characterised her cultural remembrance. The written construction of an ideologically anchored and consistent self, both "amazon warrior" and "ministering angel," influenced and inspired by fantastical forces and an unswerving commitment to future revolution, is akin to an

act of bequest. Remembering subjects have taken up Michel's characterisation of herself as a vector of revolutionary struggle. But, as we shall see, the capaciousness and malleability of Michel's representation have entailed that the nature and the means of that revolutionary struggle have remained ambiguous and open to appropriation for different causes and approaches to political change.

Insider/Outsider: Louise Michel's Afterlives

In the years since Michel's death, her cultural memory has taken many shapes and developed in different directions. In the circulation of Michel's memory today, remembering subjects continue to recall her in mythologised terms as an exceptional and symbolic figure of strength, virtue and resistance. The lineage of many of these representations can be clearly traced back to Michel's memoirs and a process whereby negative depictions of her have been increasingly subverted and their associations changed over time to meet the political needs of successive presents.[7]

Michel's afterlives can be divided into several phases. In the first phase, starting from her death and ending with the 1920s (a period during which many of her supporters were still alive), her legacy became a battleground for different political factions on the French Left. Disagreements about how best to commemorate her proliferated, including as we have seen, disputes over who should organise her funeral, what her statue should look like or whether there should be a statue of her at all (Rétat, 2019). Thereafter, for much of the early twentieth century, Michel's remembrance was largely the domain of the French Communist Party (PC); she formed part of a pantheon of exemplary revolutionaries, notwithstanding her anarchism (Verhaeghe, 2021b). At this point Michel's case corresponded with the remembrance of the Paris Commune detailed by Éric Fournier (2013), who notes that over the course of the twentieth century, there were occasional—if largely unsuccessful—attempts to appropriate the event into a mainstream Republican narrative.

However, around the late 1960s/early 1970s Michel became a figure of interest to socialist feminist activists, historians and politicians in the Parti socialiste (Vlessing, 2023). Her visibility in French civil society has continued to grow since then: a 2016 study of the naming of streets in France determined "Louise Michel" as the 61st most popular choice and the 5th most popular among women's names (after Notre-Dame, Marie Curie, Jeanne d'Arc and George Sand) (Garnier, 2016). Crowning this

was the renaming of a large square in Montmartre under the Sacré Cœur—the very church that had been built to celebrate the failure of the Paris Commune (Traverso, 2021: 174)—as the Place Louise Michel in 2004. The square had been named after the painter and illustrator Adolphe Willette, but, on the grounds of Willette's antisemitism, the municipality of Paris decided to change the name of the square and replace it with a name that clearly stood against discrimination (Verhaeghe, 2021b: 274). In acts of remembrance like this, Louise Michel's integration into the mainstream relies on two apparently contradictory elements: the way her presence provides a precise referent to a national past as a leader and historian of the Commune; and the ease with which she can be abstracted from that political context and celebrated as a figure of national progress, liberty and feminism.

Although she is interpreted as a figure of French national pride, Michel's longstanding flexibility—the relative effortlessness with which the historic and imaginary are brought together in her recollection—means that she remains a heroic figure for a diverse range of more contemporary collectives and individuals. The past few years have seen an increasing number of French publications that explicitly consider the arc of Michel's remembrance over time (Rétat, 2019; Verhaeghe, 2021b), highlighting the part played by those who have built and sustained Michel as a legendary public figure. Building from the question 'How come Michel remains such a well-known figure today?' these texts not only acknowledge but also reinforce Michel's mythical status: her path to prominence is treated as the subject of intrigue, an obscure set of circumstances that are in need of demystifying. In doing so, they consistently celebrate the very same qualities for which Michel was vilified during her lifetime, carrying forward the vision of the Communarde as a longstanding beacon of uncompromising oppositional fervour and freedom that is exemplified within Michel's memoirs. In the course of doing so, these remembering subjects also increasingly use Michel's life and afterlives to express their own hopes for the future. The emphasis of these works is on Michel's continued appeal to artists, writers, politicians and left-wing emancipatory movements as a guiding figure.

As an example of Michel's appropriation within the cultural sphere, Maria Claudia Galera's *Le mythe Louise Michel* (2016) takes an "auto/biographical" (Stanley, 1992) approach to Louise Michel: using her biography partly as a way for the biographer to explore her own sense of identity. Many of Galera's interpretations are in line with a wider pattern,

whereby the qualities that Michel was repudiated for during her lifetime are celebrated within her afterlives, prompting praise for her exceptionality from later remembering subjects. Galera traces the story of Michel's life across France, visiting her childhood home in Haute-Marne, the building on the rue Hudon where her school was once located and the site in Auberive where Michel was imprisoned after the Commune. Along the journey, Galera recounts many of the events of Michel's story that have by this point crystallised into a set narrative: her feral childhood, her rejection of potential suitors as a young woman, her bravery as she roamed the streets of Paris dressed in the uniform of the National Guard during the Commune and her trial.

Galera (2016: 35) weaves into this narrative the story of her own discovery of Louise Michel during her youth in Brazil, how she first heard Michel's poetry on the barricades in São Paulo in 1984 and her striking sense of connection to Michel's story ever since. Her visits to these locations and comments on their contemporary state—including the tourist bar where Michel's school once was and the local church in Haute-Marne—are suffused with a sense of eeriness. The spectre of Michel seems to accompany Galera on her travels and, looking into the Auberive cell that Michel might have been locked up in, Galera (2016: 45) senses her presence: "On the door to her dungeon, ironically or because of my excessive imagination, I see cracks, vestiges of time's wear and tear, drawing a disfigured woman's face" (*Sur la porte de son cachot, ironie du hasard ou excès de mon imagination, je vois de fissures, vestiges de l'usure du temps, elle dessinent un visage de femme défiguré*). By assembling imagined presences in real locations, Galera creates a Louise Michel who is a figure of lost pasts, passively watching over the present. Her own visions thus repeat the ambiguities of Michel's memoirs, in which the legends of the past suffuse the present.

In particular, Galera's celebration of Michel's myth rests on ambivalence around Michel's gender. Immortalised in an 1871 photograph (Fig. 6.3)—which to this day is one of the few portraits of her in circulation—Michel was known to dress in the uniform of the National Guard, actively assuming a vital element of what Gullickson (2014: 184) calls "the dominant negative representation of the militant woman [at the time]" as an "unattractive, unfeminine, unmarried, menopausal, badly or falsely educated, hysterical feminist who carried a gun and dressed in men's clothing."

Fig. 6.3 *Louise Michel, portant l'uniforme des féderés.* 1871. (Public domain)

Subsequently, Michel's cross-dressing has been reinterpreted as a unique sign of her liberation. Galera (2016: 59) considers Michel's it as an expression of her personal freedom, placing Michel within a genealogy of various women who have dressed as men to take power or to move unobserved through spheres dominated by men: "This image of a woman bearing arms exaggerates a liberated figure that corresponds with her radical social project, consolidating the strength of her actions" (*Cette image d'une femme manipulant des armes est l'hyperbole de la figure libertaire qui correspondait à la radicalité de leur projet de société et qui consacrait l'obstination de leurs geste*). Reading Michel's cross-dressing as a forthright refusal to adhere to the gendered norms of the day reinterprets the representational tropes associated with her during her lifetime. Rather than being seen as an accident of various historical events, Galera's account

roots Michel's reputation in her own subversive acts of creation. Negative depictions of Michel as a dangerous or disturbed combatant morph into those of her as a brave and noble warrior. Her otherworldly reputation as a Joan of Arc-style figure, with both feminine and masculine traits, works its way through her afterlives to construe her as a role model for the different political concerns of present day. While Galera's account renders Michel a personalised figure, it remains strong on her oppositionality, even if the nature of that opposition has shifted with the times.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered Louise Michel's mythologisation across three interlinked sections. The first showed how, during her lifetime, Michel was represented—both by those who were unsympathetic and those who were sympathetic to her politics—through a series of highly gendered stereotypes, which cast her as either a demonic or angelic figure with little space for ambiguity. I have argued that, through her association with these tropes, Michel took on an exemplary function, working as a symbol for broader attitudes towards the Paris Commune. The second section looked to Michel's memoirs and uncovered the ways in which the tropes that were already attached to her are incorporated and reconfigured in her self-representation to present a powerful revolutionary subject who stands outside of time, with otherworldly associations. The final section looked at the contemporary representation of Michel, to determine how narrative schemata from her lifetime have been reinterpreted for new ideological purposes, such as national unity and feminist progress. It traced the effect of Michel's gendered mythologisation over time to demonstrate the malleability of her recollection in the present day.

The mediation of Louise Michel's life into a hyperbolic form—through which the ungraspable and ineffable Michel can come to stand for an entire revolution—has consistently underpinned her cultural remembrance. The mythologisation of historical activists has a two-part effect. On the one hand, it opens their remembrance to the attention of new remembering subjects as well as to new connections and associations. The appearance of Michel's name or image on French metro stations or postage stamps has depended on a certain level of abstraction and elevation, enabled by her interpretation—following a tradition in which female figures stand as "bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning" (Kelleher, 1997: 6)—as an exceptional *woman* above all. On the other hand, across

successive mythologisations, Michel's strident anarchism slips in and out of focus; sometimes it is a defining aspect of her political activity, other times it passes unmentioned, appearing as an archaic demonstration of her defiance or as an unexplained adjective in her biography. Despite the ease with which a historic revolutionary like Michel is represented in an abstracted and exemplary form to serve different causes, Barthes's (2006: 142) concerns about myth as a form of "depoliticized speech" remain apt. Over time, Michel moves from being a symbol of the particular political concerns of the Commune to a symbol of left-wing revolution, and ultimately to a symbol of general resistance—with little precision about the reasons for or mechanisms behind that resistance.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.
2. My summary of Michel's life and afterlives draws from an overview of life writing on her, including her own memoirs. These are Boyer (1927); Planche (1946); Moser (1947); Michel (1997, 1981); Hart (2001); Feeley (2010); Verhaeghe (2012); Gauthier (2013); Bantman (2017); Rétat (2019); Eichner (2022).
3. Between 1880 and 1899 Michel appeared on the cover of *Le Grelot* at least ten times (Verhaeghe, 2021b: 84).
4. Such caricatures have clear precedents in the cartoons used to depict women active in the 1848 uprising, which played on the perceived ridiculousness of women taking on 'men's' roles and frequently depicted public-facing women as sexually deviant (Strumingher, 2012).
5. The narrating "I" is the teller of the autobiographical narrative—although they are inevitably split and multiple, speaking in many different voices (Smith & Watson, 2010: 59–60).
6. She writes that she is not as brave as rumoured and appeals to the reader not to mythologise her further: "*Je ne suis pas méritante, puisque je suis ma pente comme tous les êtres et comme toutes les choses, mais je ne suis pas non plus un monstre. Nous sommes tous des produits de notre époque, voilà tout. Chacun de nous a ses qualités et ses défauts*" (Michel, 1997: 277).

7. The notion that representations of Michel with negative valence have not endured corresponds with Ann Rigney's findings on the broader remembrance of the Paris Commune (forthcoming): that over time celebratory representations of the Paris Commune came to outweigh those that were negative, as those with a negative stake in the event's representation had little interest in furthering its commemoration.

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CHAPTER 7

Nicaragua in the Rearview Mirror: Life Writing by Leftist US Activists Since the 1980s

Verena Baier

Remembering 1980s Leftist Nicaragua Activism

"It would be nice to leave all this activity with the 1980s," activist Susan DuBois wrote in 1989 in a letter to the Nicaragua solidarity organisation Pledge of Resistance, "but unfortunately I don't think that's likely."[1] As DuBois's statement anticipated, the fascination with Nicaragua and the identification with the collective spirit it brought about during the 1980s did not lose its appeal after the heydays of the US Nicaragua peace and solidarity movement (PSM), as is shown by the myriad of life writings by US activists published after the end of the Nicaraguan Revolution in February 1990.

Although US-based Nicaragua activism had run its course and protests in US streets, Nicaragua-related events in many US cities or trips to Nicaragua were over, the debate continued in various forms. Of the 61 works of life writing that relate to the PSM, 35 appeared after 1990, with

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the last one published as late as 2023. In line with Enzo Traverso's idea of left-wing melancholia, the defeat of a leftist utopia also triggered a productive engagement with the past (Traverso, 2016) in the form of narratives remembering the PSM as a movement. This chapter examines how different life narratives relating to Nicaragua activism produce usable pasts that extend into the present, carrying the former activists' autobiographical narratives while also informing their diagnosis of the present.

The US Nicaragua Peace and Solidarity Movement

Since the 1979 overthrow of Nicaragua's Somoza dictatorship[2] by the leftist Sandinistas, revolutionary Nicaragua was eyed and envied by the US left, promising a modicum of hope for their utopian visions of a new society. The election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 both indicated and produced a general push to the right in the US political landscape and the emergence of the so-called New Right (Wilentz, 2009: 122). Adorning its rightist-conservative political slant with ardent anti-communism, one of the Reagan government's trademarks was support for Nicaragua's rightist counterrevolution, the Contras. These counterrevolutionary forces, increasingly supported by the US, tried to topple the Sandinista government leading to heavy fighting, particularly in the more remote parts of Nicaragua.[3]

In this polarised political climate, the Nicaraguan Revolution and the Contra War triggered the active involvement of a diverse group of people and saw the formation of the PSM, which advocated for a peace process in Nicaragua and often also voiced allegiance to the Sandinistas. The Reagan government's aggressive anti-communism and the thriving of the revolutionary left in Nicaragua thus led to a transnational activism combining different strands of leftist internationalism, such as anti-imperialism, anti-interventionism, and socialism (Striffler, 2019). In that context, several organisations were founded, including Witness for Peace (WFP) in 1983 and the Architects and Planners in Support of the Nicaraguan Revolution (APSNICA) in 1984. Many of their members also travelled to Nicaragua as short-term *brigadistas* or long-term *internacionalistas*, supporting the revolutionary project and, in some cases, witnessing the atrocities of the Contra War. It is hard to estimate how many volunteers were involved in the PSM, as the sources are highly divergent in this matter. However, there is a general consensus among scholars that at least 100,000 US citizens travelled to Nicaragua for peace and solidarity purposes during the

1980s (Smith, 1996: 158; Membreño Idiáquez, 1997; Babb, 2010: 264; Peace, 2012: 3; Perla, 2017: 104).[4]

As many PSM activists' identities were closely linked to the Nicaraguan Revolution, its assumed ending with the defeat of the Sandinistas in the general elections in February 1990 also affected their self-understanding as activists. For many of them, it meant the end of much of their peace and humanitarian aid work[5] and undermined their own convictions and aspirations (Hedges, 1990; Martin, 2012: 44). However, as research on the cultural memory-making processes of social movements suggests, "[i]dentity-building also means that a sense of collective belonging can be maintained even after a specific initiative or a particular campaign has come to an end" (Della Porta & Diani, 2009: 24). Meaning-making and continued identification in the context of alleged endings—the idea of *not* "leav[ing] all this activity with the 1980s" (DuBois, 1989)—can be traced in post-1990 life writing, a medium that unveils the profound entanglements between individual and collective processes of identity construction and memory-making (Depkat, 2015: 48–49).

Life Writing in the PSM: Usable Pasts and Present Aspirations

Already in the 1980s, US activists wrote personal accounts blending their experiences with the movement's story (Perkins, 2000: 7). Although most of those life writings were niche publications and did not receive broad critical attention, they aimed to convey the PSM's goals to a broader audience. Thus, while memory-making had already started during the 1980s, at the height of the movement, the assumed closedness of the future triggered a different wave of cultural memory work after 1990. When many Nicaragua solidarity organisations were dissolved, and Nicaragua had disappeared from the front pages of US newspapers, no longer a hot topic in Washington's politics and no longer provoking different camps in US society to clash over their support of either the Sandinistas or the Contras (Alterman, 2021), life writing often became the sole medium for Nicaragua-related debates and the carrier of the movement's cultural memory.

Investigating the PSM's post-1990 life writing production thus reveals two entangled processes. Firstly, life writing produces and negotiates the movement's cultural memory while offering space for disparate experiences. A close study of life writing on Nicaragua activism reveals common trends in this large corpus: the PSM, its peace efforts, and its work in

support of the Nicaraguan Revolution are mostly portrayed in a positive light, underscoring the achievements of the PSM and its righteous conduct, and leaving little room for critical evaluations. Ever since the 1980s, the utopian zeitgeist prevalent in activist circles also seems to have dominated scholarly and popularising literature on the topic. As Roger Peace (2015: 75) put it, "the dominant view is clearly critical of the Reagan administration's policies" and judges the PSM's efforts rather favourably. This spirit continues to dominate both in activist and scholarly circles—two connected realms as the Nicaraguan Revolution inspired activist and academic debates alike. Most of the actors involved come from the same generation and have lived deeply entangled lives. While post-1990 life writing mostly continues this tradition, some individual writers also offer more nuanced perspectives or even openly challenge the Nicaraguan Revolution and the movement community, thus contributing to the evolution of the PSM's cultural memory in the light of changing realities.

Secondly, the analysis of life writing reveals how the interpretation of past lives can be mobilised for present-day issues. Following Van Wyck Brooks's (1918: 337) original idea of the past as "an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals," the idea of a "usable past" highlights the meaning of the past for the present, not only in building ties within communities and groups (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 2000: 116) but also in mobilising for present-day socio-political endeavours (Blake, 1999: 425). In the case at hand then, producing cultural memory and responding to the contemporary world are deeply entangled activities. The analysis of the personal life stories of former activists thus adds to Traverso's insights into the cultural expressions of left-wing melancholia by focusing in particular on life writing and its construction of agency. In doing so, it also traces the impact of personal memories on the sum of cultural memory-making processes within leftist Nicaragua movements.

In exploring these issues, the present chapter examines six exemplary cases of post-1990 life writing from the PSM. Ed Griffin-Nolan's *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance* (1991) documents the group Witness for Peace's collective resilience, transforming the account into an "archive of hope" (Jolly, 2019: 242) for the ongoing activism of the group. Stephen Kerpen's *APSNICA: Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua* (2016) traces the personal memory-making project of a former activist who, by inscribing himself into the history of the group APSNICA, produces its cultural memory. Proceeding with this sense of continuity, Sharon Rezac Andersen's *The Burden of Knowing: A Journey, a Friendship, and the*

Power of Truth in Nicaragua (2013) uses previous activist efforts in Nicaragua point out to the ongoing need for action, for example, in relation to the Iraq War. Deb Olin Unferth's *Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the Sandinistas* (2011) portrays personal disillusionment with an activist's former life and is a rare example of disparate memory production within the realm of Nicaragua activism. Margaret Randall's *I Never Left Home: A Memoir of Time and Place* (2020) weaves together narratives of the past with the tumultuous present, marked by the 2018 protests against the Ortega/Murillo regime, and calls for a rethinking of Nicaragua solidarity. Wendy Raebeck's *Nicaragua Story: Back Roads of the Contra War* (2022) offers a different perspective on the post-2018 protests era, again arguing for continuity and the enduring validity of the Nicaraguan Revolution. This variety offers a mosaic of positions towards 1980s Nicaragua activism that not only demonstrates how the writers produce usable pasts in light of their present-day experiences but also challenges the once-unified positive assessment of Nicaragua activism within PSM circles and scholarly communities.

Tracing Left-Wing Melancholia: The Hybridity of Post-1980s Memory-Making of the PSM

"We Have Only Started":[6] Archiving Hope and Mobilising for the Future

In February 1990, the outcome of the Nicaraguan Revolution seemed clear: it had failed, at least for the time being. As the *New York Times* wrote, "[a]fter the Sandinista Party lost the national election in February, … volunteers returned to the United States" and "now find themselves … stunned by defeat, deserted by their constituency and searching for a new outlet for their dreams" as "the Sandinistas' loss of power has removed much of the utopian appeal of the work" (Hedges, 1990). Thus, 1990 marked a caesura for the activists and was narrated as an experience of ending: the age of the movement was over, and whatever came afterwards had not yet started. It now seemed clear that—as Enzo Traverso puts it in his work on the twentieth-century defeat of leftist revolutionary projects—the principle of hope had to give way to a general sombreness (Traverso, 2016: 6). In this context of alleged despair, with the knowledge that the PSM was finished—or at least crumbling, Ed Griffin-Nolan published

Witness for Peace[7] in 1991. Against the prevailing critique that since Nicaragua's revolutionary project had failed, "the work of Witness," too, was simply "a failure" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 225), *Witness for Peace* offered a collective autobiography of the organisation which, in claiming many past achievements, became an archive of hope as well as a tool for turning this past into a possible future.[8]

Throughout the narrative, the narrator takes on the collective perspective of either "Witness for Peace," or "Witnesses," using the third person singular or plural and claiming that "everyone"[9] is included in this point of view. Narrating the group's story from a collective perspective underlines the group's deeply collective agenda during the 1980s, the fact that it "had no single charismatic leader, no tornado," but was instead "a pack of dust demons" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 93). In this collectivity lie the group's achievements in fostering change, as "across the country, small voices were questioning the right of a mighty nation to bully its smaller neighbor" and "tugged at the edge of the nation's conscience" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 96). WFP's story becomes a coherent story of contention, the story of when "[t]he combined impact of so many people spinning and churning and moving tiny bits of earth began to make a difference over time" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 94). The account proudly relates WFP's many achievements: how "Witness did help promote the peace that communities are now feeling after nearly a decade of war" and how "Witness for Peace can take some credit for being part of the movement that finally put a stop to contra military aid" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 227). It concludes that "Witness for Peace can regard its work to date as successful in many respects" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 232). As much as this collective archive of hope underscores its past successes as a group, it also stresses the continuity of the organisation's collective aspirations. The future is not lost, as a still united WFP commits itself to "continuous nonviolent resistance" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 233).

Thus, in *Witness for Peace,* collectivity is not something that just belongs to the past. The narrative remnants of contentious lives, those "oppositional stories, each an alternative at odds with or precluded by preexisting and dominant social narratives" (Davis, 2022: 25) become archives of hope, energising those who were involved at the time and educating future generations (Jolly, 2019: 242). The conserved memories thus also work in the present of 1991 when, after just witnessing the failure of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the future looks bleak for WFP. By historicising the saga of the "pack of dust demons" in the form of a published memory, the

biography becomes part of the counternarrative the collective was aiming to produce. The group's use of life writing as a medium, as a "sit[e] of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories" (Smith & Watson, 2010: 54), both captures and produces the agency of WFP's activism and then uses its contentious story to resonate in, work, and shape the larger system it is embedded in (Davis, 2022: 25).

At a time of an alleged ending, in the light of the Sandinista defeat and the end of the need to protect Nicaraguans from US intervention, *Witness for Peace* then transports the remembered struggles of the "pack of dust demons," as well as the remembered accomplishments, into its possible future, stating that "[a]s this book goes to press, Witness is continuing its presence in Nicaragua and expanding" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 226). In 1991, the dust demons' past and future meet; rather than writing the end of their activism, by bundling the story of the contentious lives into a published account of life writing, WFP's activism gains new agency and thus not only narrates the saga of WFP but converts it into useful and usable memory.

As *Witness for Peace* states, "[i]f Witness has really learned the lesson from Latin America that the struggle lasts for lifetimes and not just for a day, then indeed something radical will have happened" (Griffin-Nolan, 1991: 233). The hope of a very recent past is archived for things to come. Following the motto "Don't Mourn, Organize!"[10] many activists turned their positive experiences, the very recent past, into new hopes for the future and encouraged continued activism. As WFP's further trajectory reveals, the organisation still exists today, and claims on its website that it redefined its focus and shifted it from Nicaragua to building "transnational grassroots solidarity to resist U.S. government and corporate policies that contribute to violence, poverty and oppression in the Americas" (Witness for Peace/Solidarity Collective, 2019). The year 1990 for the group hardly meant an ending but rather a transitional phase in which the group reassessed its former activist efforts and started to focus on organising events, actions, and trips to advocate for peace, justice, and sustainable economies in the Americas. In the case of *Witness for Peace*, activist memory is thus embedded in a collective spirit of continuity and serves as a necessary ingredient for continued activism, the basis upon which future trajectories are built.

"Why Not Make It into a Book?":[11] Personal and Collective Memory-Making

Most of the autobiographical narratives that make up the corpus of Nicaragua activism-related life writing are marked by a strong sense of continuity. This can also be observed in the next two case studies, both on a collective and on a personal level. *APSNICA* (2016) relates the story of the organisation of the same name from its foundation to its dissolution and traces its most important milestones and achievements, thus producing the organisation's shared story as the basis of its collective identity. Like *Witness for Peace*, *APSNICA* narrates the story of APSNICA[12] from the perspective of the whole organisation using a first-person plural perspective.[13] Commenting on the remembered past from the narrative perspective of the present of 2016, Stephen Kerpen (2016: 5), founding member and long-time coordinator of APSNICA, reveals that "[m]any things have changed in Nicaragua—as has the world—since we worked there." The organisational autobiography *APSNICA*[14] also addresses the 1990 end of the Nicaraguan Revolution that made Nicaragua activism harder as "[f]or many people the interest was no longer there" and for some even it "was the end of the game" (Kerpen, 2016: 145). In the section "The last chapter," he traces the moment when "APSNICA closed its doors" and from then on became history as "the most important and meaningful period in our lives" (Kerpen, 2016: 155).

However, the author also narrates his personal life story, which he inscribes in the history of the PSM, noting that since he is approaching his eightieth birthday he is "wrack[ing] [his] brain … for memories that occurred over twenty-five years ago" (Kerpen, 2016: 5). Kerpen adds that in the course of writing down his memoirs for his son, he found the Nicaragua experience so interesting that "I thought: why not make it into a book by itself" (Kerpen, 2016: 5). Thus, even though Kerpen claims that one of the main reasons for publishing *APSNICA* is a collective one, as "[w]e accomplished a lot and I didn't want it to get lost in history" (Kerpen, 2016: 5), there is an extra dimension to the memory-activism nexus: not only the importance of memory for and in activism but also the importance of activism for remembering lives, for constructing the story of the self. Knowing that his fellow activists might be at similar points in their lives and fearing the end of a whole political generation, Kerpen thus considers himself "the last man standing," responsible for producing a collective legacy as well as underscoring present achievements and future

endeavours.: not only the importance of memory for and in activism but also the importance of activism for remembering lives, for constructing the story of the self. Knowing that his fellow activists might be at similar points in their lives and fearing the end of a whole political generation, Kerpen thus considers himself "the last man standing," responsible for producing a collective legacy as well as underscoring present achievements and future endeavours.

Throughout the account, Kerpen (2016: 91) also includes stories about himself, little anecdotes which "[n]o one can make up … like that." In one instance, he narrates how he wants to transport much-needed goods to remote regions destroyed by Hurricane Joan in 1988 but finds his bag and passport stolen during a layover in Mexico City just before he plans to get on the flight to Managua. What follows, then, is a deeply personal account of the adventures of Stephen Kerpen, who races through Mexico City, feels "absolutely defeated" (Kerpen, 2016: 85) several times, and is "not sure whether cops were running after me" (86) and in the end makes his flight, "drenched with sweat and completely drained" (86). This is only one of the many personal anecdotes that Kerpen narratively mixes with APSNICA's history, in which he played an important role. Thus, conversely, writing down APSNICA's story also means narrating the adventure of his lifetime.

APSNICA not only articulates the memory of an organisation but also contributes to the identity production of its members, in this case through the present-day perspective of narrator Stephen Kerpen, thus revealing the entanglement of individual and collective agency in social movement life writing. Even though the narrative form suggests a work of collaborative life writing in which a collective agent relates the story, it is mainly Stephen Kerpen's point of view that moves the story forward and documents the many trajectories of the solidarity organisation during the course of his own life. Even though it is a temporally limited phase in a larger life cycle, the story of the lifespan of the social movement gives meaning to and influences the whole life journey. Kerpen, nearing the last phase of his life, continues to draw strength and meaning from his involvement in the PSM over 25 years ago, even though his activist efforts were discontinued shortly after the Sandinista defeat due to his organisation's dissolution in 1992.

Moreover, the case shows how personal stories can become part of and even decisively shape the larger cultural memory of the movement by adding a unique individual perspective. Read within the broader framework of

PSM's cultural memory-making, *APSNICA* reveals how a supposedly personal memory-making project—the written accounts of an activist who, approaching his eightieth birthday, decides to conserve his life's most valuable achievements—can become a historical document. This reading is underscored by the fact that Kerpen himself donated all collected remnants of APSNICA, including his self-published account *APSNICA*, to Stanford University's Hoover Institution in 2018,[15] seeking the help of archivists to take care of the legacy of his activism professionally, and anticipating historians and professional researchers among those who will be interested in APSNICA's history in the future. At that time, in the late 2010s, Nicaragua-related news, let alone any Nicaragua solidarity activities, were not particularly present in public debate in the US (Jacobs, 2010). Thus, in producing the cultural memory of activism, Kerpen also succeeded in rescuing his version of the history of the organisation from oblivion.

"I Am Certain You Are There":[16] Evoking the Old Activist Self

In a similar vein, Sharon Rezac Andersen's *The Burden of Knowing* (2013) reconstructs the author's 1980s Nicaragua experience as a resource for "the spirit of hope" (back cover), and hence as a remedy and inspiration for present-day situations. Writing in 2013, Rezac Andersen continues to oppose US policies, in particular when it comes to a historical event that seems to have triggered the publication of her 1980s Nicaragua memories: the Iraq War.

Rezac Andersen (2013: 159) writes down her memories, noting that "[o]ne of the biggest changes … took place September 11, 2001." Her present perspective is shaped by the subsequent War on Terror, and "[t]he turmoil within the United States [which] created chaos unlike any I had previously witnessed in this country" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 159). In this way, Rezac Andersen evokes her old activist self to claim and maintain a strong stance in the present political climate in the US. As Julie Rak (2013: 35) argues, the Iraq War in particular led to a boom in publishing autobiographical narratives through which writers "participated in and reflected changes in how Americans understood themselves as citizens of a public." Rezac Andersen takes this meaning-making even a step further and constructs continuities between different historical events.

She encourages her audience to bridge the gap between her experiences of fighting for justice and resisting Reagan's Nicaragua policies in the

1980s and the need to continuously fight for justice in the US, for instance, by critically commenting on the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing war. She notes that "[n]o weapons of mass destruction were ever found" and "[t]he cost of the seven-year Iraq War has been over three trillion dollars, leaving the United States with its largest debt since the Great Depression" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 160). She then links her present experiences to her past ones, asking: "Doesn't that sound like the same questions we asked while studying in Nicaragua?" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 161). Taking her own life as a blueprint, she not only establishes connections between two historical events, between two wars, but also recounts her involvement in having tried to prevent one. From her present viewpoint, she states that "we can take credit for engaging the masses in local, state, and global communities" that demanded an end to military aid to the Contras (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 132). For Rezac Andersen (2013: vii), her Nicaragua activism is not only "a life experience I'll always remember" but one with which she works in the present. In 2013, by taking her own activism as an example, she attempted to provoke similar moments of dissent from within her intended audience.

From the beginning of her account, Rezac Andersen tries to incorporate her imagined readers in her story. Stating that "I welcome you as a traveller on your own life journey" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: ix), she explicitly invites the readers to join her perspective and asks them to reinterpret her Nicaragua experiences in their own respective contexts and to use what they learn from the book to help make the world better. At the end of her account, readers are offered an intimate, albeit imaginary letter written by Rezac Andersen to her long-deceased friend, mentor, and fellow activist, Sr. Marjorie Tuite, who had passed away in 1986, thus before the ending of the Nicaraguan Revolution. "Dear Margie" is written from the present-day perspective of twenty-six years later and uses the form of a personal letter to her late friend, which resembles an intimate conversation with the remnants of a long-lost past. "Dear Margie," Rezac Andersen (2013: 157) writes, "Where are you? … I am certain you are there." She continues by stating "I want to tell you about some important events that have taken place in the world. … Whatever the circumstance, it feels good to share some thoughts with you" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 157).

Instead of merely chronicling the movement's history, the narrative crafts its memory in an intimate conversation with a close friend. When the implied readers, rather than Margie, read the letters, they become accomplices in "making this a more preferred, pluralistic world for all"

(Rezac Andersen, 2013: 165). When she tells Margie that "[w]e desperately need your values engaged in the world's reality today" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 157–158), the reader is also included in that direct appeal. By constructing a letter to a fellow peace activist, Rezac Andersen also imitates a very common practice in the PSM during the 1980s: writing letters from Nicaragua. As Margaretta Jolly (2008: 2) argued, "[l]etters are a staple of any political movement," serving not only as documentation of the struggle but also as crucial elements in fostering community relations within the movement. Throughout the 1980s, letters by peace activists written home to their fellow activists were used to communicate the urgency of stopping the Contra War and the need to do something. By using that same technique now, albeit thirty years later, Rezac Andersen suggests a similar urgency to intervene in and protest against current political developments.

She thus makes the memory of past activism usable for the future and at the same time constructs her present identity by reference to her past as an activist, writing that "I am committed to continuing [this] heritage. … I believe that the hope for the future resides in [this] legacy" (Rezac Andersen, 2013: 165–166). However, she remains unclear about the specific measures she plans to take to continue her activism. Rather, it is by spreading her memory and shaping the reaction of her future readers that Rezac Andersen attempts to spark and encourage a critical engagement with current political and social injustices. By linking current transgressions to past ones and by underscoring her previous activist endeavours, she thereby points out contemporary parallels and indicates starting points for others to act. Her case thus exemplifies a pattern that we will discuss in greater detail in the last part of this chapter: the use of memory in latter-day contention (Rigney, 2018, 2021). First, however, we will consider a case in which the continuity between past and present is challenged.

"They Called Us Sandalistas":[17] Challenging the Cultural Memory of the PSM

Already, the full title *Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the Sandinistas* (2011) suggests a different approach to activist memory-making. Rather than contributing to the consensual success story that the memory of Nicaragua activism mostly implies, or making past experiences usable for present endeavours, Unferth from the beginning sets a different tone.[18] She approaches her activist past with the lens of a knowing and

slightly disillusioned grown-up who looks back to her naïve and youthful activist self of 1987.

Unferth (2011: 23) recounts how her decision to become involved in Nicaragua activism at that time was sparked by her romantic involvement with another student who was also an activist and whom she finds "daring and visionary." She relates how she became part of the activist community in Nicaragua, summarising their joint efforts with the words: "We held poetry readings and story time. We did tricks for the kids. We looked for air-conditioning. We would make this revolution, we swore. Our team would win" (Unferth, 2011: 83). However, since then, Unferth has completely broken with her activist days and withdrawn from the movement circles.

Looking back to her former self from the point of view of 2011, her account complies with a typical conversion narrative that follows the radical transformation of a flawed "before self" to a knowing "after self" (Smith and Watson, 2010: 266). The present-day narrating "I" comments on the narrated "I" of 1987 and questions her involvement, stating that she probably was not a very good activist, as "I did nothing … didn't save anyone … had absolutely no effect on anything that happened" (Unferth, 2011: 121–122). The 2011 Unferth (142) relates how she gets to know her former self again through her journals which her present self finds "unbearable, the most god-awful crap anyone has ever written. It causes me physical pain to see them." By claiming that "I don't recognize the person who wrote those journals" (Unferth, 2011: 143), she not only stresses the distance to her younger, very immature "I" with a head full of crazy ideas but also to her past ideological conviction, the conviction that "[o]ur team would win" (83). Rather than regret, however, it is the striving for coherence that guides her story. From the point of view of a disillusioned adult self, at a time when her activist phase has long ended, she reinterprets her activist past in the present and constructs an "excoriatingly honest story of being young, semi-idealistic, stupid, and in love" (back cover). Seemingly, her memory of her 1980s activism has no longer any activist claim in 2011. Instead, she has learnt many life lessons and has come of age.

Her former fellow activists are included in her scathing criticism, for instance, when she relates that "the Nicaraguans called us Sandalistas" (Unferth, 2011: 89) due to the sandals and hippie-like demeanour many activists sported. Cynically, she comments on the activities of the American activists, directly addressing the implied reader: "Imagine. We were

walking across their war, juggling. We were bringing guitars … The Nicaraguans wanted land, literacy, a decent doctor. We wanted a nice sing-a-long [*sic*] and a ballet. We weren't a revolution. We were an armed circus" (Unferth, 2011: 87). With this devastating verdict she not only questions her past identity, but the PSM itself, not only mocking her younger self, but also a whole generation of Nicaragua activists. Unferth (2011: 208) ends her account by stating that she and her boyfriend, in fact, "didn't just live there for the rest of our lives," which can be interpreted as a sideswipe at all those former activists who continue to be stuck in their remembered dreams of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

In the end, Unferth (2011: 174), however, also unveils a different perspective when she admits that she misses "[o]ld Nica, Nica of the revolution" and states that "those were the days." Thus, Unferth's account also includes a new variant of left-wing melancholia. A melancholia that, despite disillusionment, has not become motionless but longs for simpler and more hopeful times when "[e]veryone was so excited" (Unferth, 2011: 176). Unferth dreams of the Nicaragua of her past; she "want[s] it to exist" (2011: 206) but manages to reflect on it critically without assuming its continued relevance. Perhaps it is fitting that the cover of *Revolution* depicts the silhouette of a woman dressed up for the revolution, sporting the peace sign and a decorative ammunition belt. It mockingly symbolises her past self yet includes a longing for this past.

With her account, Unferth thus offers a critical addition to the memory of the movement. While the works examined above are clearly niche publications, hers received considerable attention and was positively acclaimed in mainstream media for its "hilarious and painful" (Schuyler, 2011) coming-of-age element.[19] The positive reception and mainstream recognition of Deb Olin Unferth's autobiographical account may help preserve alternative narratives within the cultural memory of the movement and contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive cultural memory of the PSM.

"Why Can't We Think for Ourselves?":[20] Challenging Continuities

In contrast to Unferth, other writers have continued to draw on their experiences in Nicaragua to understand contemporary political and social developments. Since April 2018, when protests against social reforms escalated and led to deadly clashes between demonstrators and government forces in Nicaragua, a cycle of brutal repression has been ongoing,

targeting all voices opposed to the government of President Daniel Ortega and his wife Vice President Rosario Murillo. US activists who had been involved in the Nicaragua PSM of the 1980s used online networks and platforms to exchange information and interpretations of the events unfolding in Nicaragua.[21] From then on, however, the once united PSM camp split into two opposing camps.

The first group consists of those who have continued to support the Nicaraguan government, calling the protests destabilising actions orchestrated by opposition groups or external forces, in particular by the US. This camp supports the government's narrative and its efforts to maintain stability, often downplaying reports of human rights abuses.[22] The second consists of activists, disillusioned with the direction taken by the Ortega/Murillo regime, who strongly oppose the Ortega/Murillo government's response to the protests, denouncing the regime's human rights violations and demanding an end to government-led violence and repression.[23] All those new expressions of solidarity—rooting for whichever side—have been driven by activists' memories of the past solidarity movement, of personal past experiences with the Sandinista revolution, and their work in supporting it. Both sides wrote public letters advocating for their camp.[24] Moreover, members of both sides published autobiographical accounts in which they negotiate the past, present, and future of Nicaragua activism.[25] Since 2018, cultural memory production relating to Nicaragua has not only increased but has arguably also provided a new arena for playing out political differences.

In her 2020 account, *I Never Left Home*, Margaret Randall looks back at her outstanding activist life in which she advocated for feminist and social justice movements, with her involvement in solidarity efforts for Nicaragua as a particularly important phase.[26] She narrates her activist endeavours, including her participation in several cultural projects to support the Sandinistas. However, rather than enthusiastically recalling the past dreams of a new society, she readily admits the failure of the project, not only in 1990 but also today, a failure that includes all those still rooting for Ortega's Nicaragua.

She illustrates this failure through the analogy of a volcano with which she begins her Nicaragua account. Volcanoes, in particular the Santiago crater in Masaya, "came to symbolize" Nicaragua for her (Randall, 2020: 218). She relates how, during the 1980s, she would visit Santiago often, "mesmerized by the bright orange sea of fiery magma tossing and turning in Santiago's depths" (Randall, 2020: 218). After the 1980s, however, the

volcano has somehow lost its magic. She narrates that "when I returned to Nicaragua with my wife, Barbara, in 1992 and took her out to see the mass of swirling magma that had so intrigued me when I'd lived there, Santiago was sleeping profoundly. Only a crust of bleak earth met us when we reached the volcano's lip" (Randall, 2020: 218). This analogy already sets the general tone for her account of how she became involved in a revolution that in the context of a new present has lost its appeal.

However, she also crafts her memory to mobilise Nicaragua activism again. This time, she wants her readers to be aware of the disaster the people she used to work for in the 1980s are now bringing over Nicaragua. In doing so, she also evokes and makes use of left-wing melancholia in that she recalls past defeat and the "vanquished of history" (Traverso, 2016: xv) to mobilise new debates. Knowing that Ortega "would turn what began as a beautiful revolutionary experiment into a vicious autocracy" (Randall, 2020: 203), she annotates her past experiences with comments from the present. Thus, "today's"—that is, the 2020—version of her story changes her verdict on the Nicaraguan Revolution and makes her able to assess its "successes and failures" (Randall, 2020: 240). She notes, for example, that "true Sandinism, that which was envisioned by the movement's founders and martyrs, only existed during the first half of that decade" (Randall, 2020: 240). With her rewritten memory, she thus also contributes to a new version of the cultural memory of Nicaragua activism. Due to her fame as a lifelong activist and poet, her account *I Never Left Home* also reaches a broad range of audiences and has been read outside of the circles of former PMS activists.[27]

A comparison with earlier accounts demonstrates that Randall not only uses her memory in a new present to make sense of her current activist convictions but also reframes existing memories to underscore her present claims. For instance, she relates how she worked with Rosario Murillo on a project, and states "I have never observed a more mean-spirited person. She seemed to enjoy humiliating colleagues and strangers alike" (Randall, 2020: 203, 205). With those remarks, Randall reframes her 1980s memories to fit her present-day verdict of the Ortega/Murillo regime as a cold, reckless, power-hungry dictatorship. According to Randall (2020: 205), already back then there were signs of "[t]he couple's cold and calculating criminality."

In the foreword to her 2022 interview collection *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers* she finds even stronger words, stating that even during the 1980s, "it is clear one could already

see the problems beginning to emerge … some had begun to display the unmistakable signs of misogyny, greed and deception" (Randall, 2022: 2). In the original 1984 introduction to *Somersault*, however, she relates her experiences in 1980s Nicaragua quite differently. She calls the Sandinista Revolution an important chapter in the emergence of "successful people's revolutions on the continent" (Randall, 2022: 20), and praises Rosario Murillo and Daniel Ortega as poets, underscoring that Murillo had inspired her own writing (15–16). The comparison between the two forewords reveals that for Randall, recalling her 1980s Nicaragua activism in a post-2018 context also means reinterpreting it to further her present agenda of denouncing the current Nicaraguan government.

Ironically, Randall, a lifelong contentious subject, is now no longer contentious in the public eye when it comes to Nicaragua since her stance matches official US opinion on the Ortega regime. Rather, she has become a contentious subject for her former solidarity activists who "continue to support the Ortega/Murillo government" and, in her opinion, simply out of principle are "claiming that the real villain is the United States" (Randall, 2020: 235) and "that if the US government confronts the Ortega/Murillo regime, our only choice is to defend it" (Randall, 2022: 8). Challenging her fellow activists, she addresses her companions directly, critically asking "Why can't we think for ourselves? … How many more Nicaraguans will have to be kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured, murdered, or forced into exile before this husband and wife duo are seen for the tyrants they are?" (Randall, 2022: 8). In 2020, her principle of hope transformed into a principle of responsibility (Traverso, 2016: 6).

Rather than expressing continued solidarity with the Sandinistas and continuing her past stance, she joins the new post-2018 debates and solidarity mobilisations with a contentious opinion. Relentlessly, she keeps fighting for Nicaragua; this time not for the Sandinistas, but for the victims of the Ortega regime, and gives talks and interviews, writes articles and opinion pieces.[28] Examining her life writing thus not only reveals Randall's new approach to Nicaragua activism, but also demonstrates how her memory has shifted from her previous beliefs over time and is rewritten as a catalyst for revitalised solidarity activism for Nicaragua.

"[T]he Sandinistas Made Me Feel Lucky":[29] Campism and Continuities

In her autobiographical account *Nicaragua Story* (2022), Wendy Raebeck relates how in 1985, after a brief visit to Nicaragua, she "contracted the fever, and was motivated to somehow return to Nicaragua" (20). From then on, she supports the revolutionary project by writing about the Contra War, mingles with the peace activists, and gets involved with the (aforementioned) APSNICA.

As Raebeck (2022: 204) puts it, even in retrospect, with the distance of 30 years, her Nicaragua activism remains formative due to the memory that "[m]ore than anything else, the Sandinistas made me feel … lucky indeed. And they made me feel," with which she refers to the void Nicaragua activism filled in her life. From the first pages of her account, Raebeck not only narrates her former activism but tries to persuade her implied readers of the fact that she had done the right thing. A look at her personal homepage allows some speculation about which kind of audience her account anticipates. As the author of several books on topics of counterculture and alternative lifestyles, she advertises those as "escapist literature" that should encourage her readers to "escape the madness now" (without explicitly pointing out what madness she is referring to) (Raebeck, 2020). Her *Nicaragua Stories* is explicitly meant "for people who give a damn," for those who want to learn the truth about "recent American history" (Raebeck, 2020). Thus, very likely, the audience she anticipates with *Nicaragua Story* are those who, like herself, doubt that "the US can do no wrong" (Raebeck, 2020).

Throughout the narrative, the narrating "I" keeps close ties to the imagined readership, which she addresses directly and often includes in her story, for instance promising that together with her "you go to war, and you think about history" (Raebeck, 2022: 6), and assuring her reader that "when you finish this book, you'll know far more about not just Nicaragua but the United States" followed by an encouraging "Okay, ready to hit the road?" (6). Throughout her account, she uses several strategies to keep the connection to her implied audience. On the one hand, she claims that "the bulk of text is my original Nicaragua journal" (Raebeck, 2022: vii). Since a diary suggests privacy and intimacy, using a diary in a published autobiographical account serves as a device to create a sense of intimacy with the implied readers. With her diary entries, Raebeck invites the readers into her personal journey through Nicaragua,

during which they retrospectively witness a long-past war and the glories of a revolutionary dream. Using a diary rather than mere recall as the basis for her account also underscores its accuracy and authenticity; as she puts it, "my book … [is about] history, too" (Raebeck, 2022: vi). She also supports the historicity of her story by using footnotes, which "complete the story" (Raebeck, 2022: vii), and urging her readers to look at them: "please don't skip or skim over the notes" (vii).

It soon becomes clear why Raebeck so strongly fights to have the implied reader on her side. Her account also crafts the memory of her activism to defend her own stance in the emerging present-day Nicaragua movement. Disagreeing with those who believe the Sandinistas' revolutionary project ended with their defeat in 1990, she maintains that the Nicaraguan Revolution is ongoing and that this justifies her present pro-Ortega stance. Like Rezac Andersen, she uses the memory of activism to make sense of present politics, except that after 2018, her memory not only underscores her political beliefs but serves to nourish a new solidarity movement.

Raebeck's Nicaraguan Revolution has not yet ended, let alone failed, and she continues her activism in that spirit. Despite her initial claims to only be "turning back the clock" (Raebeck, 2022: 7), and relate things of the past, those things are all but past for her. In the conclusion to her account, she is particularly open about her current stance, claiming that "[i]f Augusto Sandino could see his country today, I believe he would be proud" (Raebeck, 2022: 213). Leftist critics of Ortega, she believes, have fallen prey to the US' imperialist logic that every country associated with communism is evil and must be attacked. With her assessment of post-2018 Nicaragua, she joins the ranks of the pro-Ortega camp that sees a US conspiracy in the new criticism of Sandinista Nicaragua, a new attempt to warn about "another communist takeover" (Raebeck, 2022: 98).

Having invited the readership on a shared journey through memories of her 1980s Nicaragua activism, she tries to convince them of the ongoing success of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Particularly in the conclusion of her account, she addresses the critics of the Ortega regime directly, stating that "for anyone wanting to portray Ortega as the new Somoza, or a dictator, or for anyone believing Daniel hasn't followed through on the Sandinista ideology, listed below are some of the changes Nicaragua has experienced under his leadership" (Raebeck, 2022: 213). What follows then is a list of the Sandinistas' past and present accomplishments, which are above all to "have kept Nicaragua free of US interference" (Raebeck,

2022: 213). Thus, for Raebeck, neither the Nicaraguan Revolution nor US imperialism nor her relentless activism is finished, and she seeks to convince the reader of these continuities. As her autobiographical account reveals, even in retrospect, her activism is so deeply tied to the Nicaraguan Revolution that her self-identification makes her ignore present-day realities in Nicaragua by continuing to support the Sandinistas.

This phenomenon is known as campism, a widely used term in the post-Cold War context designating the tendency of leftists to support authoritarian, anti-Western regimes solely because they were opposed to Western, mostly US-American imperialism. Anti-imperialism thus becomes a dominant and absolute value which prioritises solidarity with a revolutionary movement and government, even if it violates democratic principles or human rights.[30] As the acknowledged enemy back in the 1980s was clearly the US and this very enemy now supports the 2018 protest and criticises the Ortega regime, following the logic of "the friends of my enemy are my enemies, and the enemies of my enemy are my friends," activists like Raebeck continue to endorse the Ortega regime and justify their endorsement with personal memories and a historical tradition of activism.

Her personal memory of the PSM thus "energizes the relationship between past and present" (Jolly, 2019: 242). With her life story, by sticking to shared, positive memories of the 1980s, she offers her former fellow travellers a template for making sense of the 2018 crisis in Nicaragua. Ignoring the new present realities in Nicaragua completely, she fetishises her personal memories of the 1980s into a collective truth valid until the present day, with which she mobilises continued resistance against US imperialism. This development resonates with Traverso's (2016: xiv) idea that reflections on the past do not mean "a retreat to a closed universe of remembering and suffering," but mobilise present emotions and actions. However, it also shows that some PSM activists' reflections *on the present* take place in a closed universe, as they, instead of making changed circumstances usable for the diagnosis of the present, stick to past memories.

The Future of the Cultural Memory of the PSM

This chapter has traced past "collective aspirations" and the memory thereof within a very similar political generation (see the introduction to this collection) and examined how those are made usable memories in different presents. On the one hand, remembering contentious lives means

participating in present-day debates and possibly also new mobilisations of solidarity. Instead of assuming that the movement lost its relevance when it ceased to be active, past collective aspirations are reinterpreted and thus made usable in a new present. Thus, as activists involved in the 1980s movement continue to write about their lives and past activism, those stories can also become both a source and authenticator of new movements, meaning that an interpretation of the past is used to justify new activist endeavours. Since the end of the movement, new generations have grown up and developed a political consciousness. However, when it comes to Nicaragua, today's new generation of solidarity activists are, if at all, more focused on present issues like the US immigration crisis and borderland politics than the stories of older Nicaragua activisms (Alterman, 2021). Thus, veterans of past movements, such as Raebeck and Randall, are back in action, using their personal memories of activism as manifestos to inspire new solidarity. They are turning their personal experiences into powerful messages that guide today's fights for justice for Nicaragua and ensure that the spirit of the past keeps shaping the present.

Keeping up the spirit of past activism, however, can also mean ignoring the many Nicaraguan voices who try to communicate their dire lived realities for the sake of an undisturbed and continuous memory of activism and a long-past version of an activist self that seems oddly disconcerting in the context of a different present. In other cases, however, as this chapter has shown, the remembering of activism can also help mitigate the fallout of such blind loyalty to an older cause and create a powerful basis for new trajectories of solidarity.

On the other hand, and related to the aforementioned productivity and evolution of the PSM even after its alleged end (as demonstrated by the literary output it continued to produce), some—still rare—efforts of reinterpretation reveal a growing schism in the cultural memory of the PSM. While memory-making during the 1980s up to the early 2000s was marked by relative consensus and harmony, mostly focusing on the PSM's achievements and the inspiring times in Nicaragua, the further trajectory of memory-making reveals emerging rifts. Those are underscored by more prominent and louder literary voices, such as Unferth or Randall, who receive mainstream critical praise, thus further contributing to the formation of a critical perspective from within the former PSM itself. This more critical strand of remembrance—in light of the political instability and outrage in Nicaragua—might even grow in the future, contributing to a more multivocal cultural memory of the PSM.

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Notes

1. See DuBois (1989).
2. Since 1933, when a rebellion led by revolutionary leader Augusto César Sandino ended the formal occupation of Nicaragua by the US Marines, Nicaragua was governed by the Somoza regime, which lasted until Anastasio Somoza Debayle was overthrown by the revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1979.
3. Shortly after the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan and the National Security Council developed the National Security Decision Directive 17 (NSDD 17), which ensured support for the counterrevolutionary forces in Nicaragua, the Contras. Despite several attempts by Congress to stop Contra aid with the Boland Amendments, a series of acts prohibiting military interference in Nicaragua, in practice US aid to the Contras continued throughout the 1980s in a covert form as the Iran-Contra scandal later brought to light in 1986.
4. Countering this leftist activism, a US Contra movement formed. Its main actors were mercenaries, often following the appeal of the infamous mercenary magazine *Soldier of Fortune* that sponsored trips to the warzone, as well as a section of the Christian Right who saw their support of the Contras as a missionary assignment and an act of Christian charity. My PhD thesis also explores how different New Right factions recall their involvement with the Nicaraguan Contras.
5. See Butigan (1990).
6. See Griffin-Nolan (1991: 225).
7. *Witness for Peace* in italics will refer to the life writing, while the normal font means the group.
8. Witness for Peace (WFP) was founded in 1983 in solidarity with Nicaraguan Christians in the war-torn border regions in Nicaragua that were prone to Contra attacks and soon developed into a nationwide organisation. The non-violent resistance to US intervention in Nicaragua meant in practice that activists travelled as "witnesses" to Nicaragua where they acted as "human shields," that is, they put their bodies between the Nicaraguans they tried to protect and the attacking Contra bands. WFP is an example

of the peace sector of the larger peace and solidarity movement (see Witness for Peace, 1983, 1984).

9. "Everyone" or "many" are frequently used to refer to the group as a whole.
10. See Nicaragua Information Center (1990).
11. See Kerpen (2016: 5).
12. The organisation Architects and Planners in Support of the Nicaraguan Revolution (APSNICA) was formed in 1984 by a nationwide group of professionals to provide technical and financial assistance. The group also led delegations to Nicaragua that helped build houses in rural areas; however, they also had a decidedly political mission and under the slogan "Help Build, Not Destroy in Nicaragua" furthered the goals of the Sandinista revolution. APSNICA is an example of the solidarity-driven sector within the larger movement (Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua, n.d.).
13. This phenomenon can also be called We-narrative; however, for this analysis a more nuanced distinction does not add any additional value.
14. *APSNIC*A in italics will refer to the life writing, while the normal font means the group.
15. Cf. "Finding Aid," Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua; Moreover, the genesis of the archival collection Architects and Planners in Support of Nicaragua was also revealed in a personal conversation with Herbert S. Klein, Professor Emeritus of History, and Latin American Curator at the Hoover Institution, Stanford.
16. See Rezac Andersen (2013: 157).
17. See Unferth (2011: 89).
18. Another work of life writing that negotiates the dissociation of a past activist self is Michael Johns's *The Education of Radical: An American Revolutionary in Sandinista Nicaragua* (2012).
19. See Schuyler (2011), see also: Scheeres (2011).
20. See Randall (2022: 8).
21. Even though after his reelection in 2006 Daniel Ortega's Sandinista government had already revealed an increasingly authoritarian style in governing the country, only much later, in 2018, did the rather homogenous approach to present-day Nicaragua and the realities of the Sandinista legacy come under scrutiny and become a heavily debated topic in the formerly united PSM camp.
22. The pro-Orteguismo camp uses the platform *Tortilla con Sal*, "an independent news and information source funded by its writers and their supporters" who "resist so far as we can the permanent endless disinformation of corporate NATO-country propaganda media, their local allies and their counterparts on the neocolonial left" (Tortilla con Sal, 2024). See also the Friendship Office of the Americas (Friendship Office of the Americas,

2024) and NicaNotes, a blog for Nicaragua activists and those interested in Nicaragua, published by the Nicaragua Network/Alliance for Global Justice (Nicaragua Network/Alliance for Global Justice, 2024).

23. This anti-Orteguismo camp attempts to inform the public about the atrocities of the Ortega/Murillo regime, publishing newspaper articles, and academic anthologies; cf. for instance, Robinson (2021); Snyder (2018); Gordon (2018). One major outlet for this side's approach is the network *North American Congress on Latin America* (NACLA) (See NACLA, n.d.).
24. See Alliance for Global Justice (US), Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group (United Kingdom) (2020), and Various Contributors (2021).
25. So far, four autobiographical accounts of PSM activists have been published since 2018: Berryman (2019); Randall (2020); Raebeck (2022); Mills (2023).
26. Margaret Randall is one of the most well-known activists in the PSM, in particular due to the publication of her book *Sandino's Daughters* in 1981, which quickly became a must-read in movement circles. She is also a poet and writer, who was and is active in many activist circles in the US, Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Her successful fight to regain US citizenship, which she gave up in 1967 when she moved to Mexico, became a cause célèbre that was supported by several activist communities, including Nicaragua solidarity organisations.
27. As proven by the critical attention it received; see, for instance, Anonymous (2019); Koss (2021); Babbitt (2020).
28. See, for instance, Randall (2021a, 2021b); NACLA (2021).
29. See Raebeck (2022: 204).
30. The term campism has gained increasing prominence in the context of the War against Ukraine, which saw some left-wing intellectuals and activists support Vladimir Putin and the Russian government, and blame US imperialism for the escalations. In the context of the New Left and leftist internationalism, the term was shaped by the Third Worldist and anti-imperialist nationalist movements of the very early Cold War (Striffler, 2019: 78). In today's meaning, which seeks to describe a division of leftism, it was first used by the academics and activists Alan Johnson and Dan La Botz and the context of the socialist journal *New Politics* (La Botz, 2022; Johnson, 1999).

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PART III

Epilogue

CHAPTER 8

The Syrian Prison: From Autobiography to the Creation of Identity

Jaber Baker

Introduction

If the saying 'we are what we remember' is true, then most Syrians, inside and outside, are prisoners at the moment these lines are being written because their memories are full of prison stories and experiences. They act as former prisoners, even if they have not personally experienced imprisonment. The Syrian gets out of prison, but the prison does not leave the prisoner. Any story the Syrian tells is the prison's story, any autobiographical recollection writes the autobiography of the Syrian Prison: a patriarch whose mark upon the Syrians' bodies, like a birthmark, changes in shape and size as time passes, but remains permanently engraved in the flesh.

"More than nineteen years have passed since I got out of prison, and despite that, I could not get rid of the memory of prison, which is still engraved in my subconscious in one way or another," writes Mufid Najm (2015: 204). For him, and many others, recalling the inescapable memory of prison is the first step in telling one's story. The prisoner's

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autobiography begins with death then birth, not birth then death. Prison memory is not a phrase to describe the stage of incarceration in the lives of (former) detainees and other Syrians. It is a form of memory recalled in the prisoner's language and enacted by the prisoner's body. Prison memory, and hence, the prisoner's autobiography, includes a series of characters, vocabulary, and personal characteristics that the (former) prisoner inherits from other prisoners as if they are inherited from a parent. All prisoners inherit their life story from their father: the Syrian Prison that writes its own autobiography on the Syrian bodies.

I call the Syrian Prison 'father' because this captures many aspects of a (former) prisoner's relation to prison. Like fathers who, because of the persistent patriarchal structure in the country, rule Syrian families, the Syrian Prison constitutes the supreme authority in prisoners' lives. Like children who inherit their fathers' traits, prisoners inherit certain characteristics from the Syrian Prison. Calling the prison 'father' does not express any sentimentality. It expresses the patriarchal power of the prison over all who enter it that dominates the kinship of its children. The former detainee Muhammad Berro told me in an interview that the "prison is a lineage, a family; we became a part of it against our will" (Syria Podcast, 2020).[1] Therefore, prison here represents the family; the detainees gradually turn into children of this father against their will, they inherit his characteristics and carry his mark in their flesh and memory even after they leave his house.

The Syrian Prison, then, is not a space of confinement where people enter and leave. It lives on in the bodies of those whom it devours, and it dominates their memories. Over the past century, the Syrian Prison has developed and grown. First, it evolved from a mere penal institution into a political space, which impacted the public political life outside of it. Then, it turned into an eternal prison, and then an extermination prison, and so it grew to become a patriarch from whom the Syrians now inherit their identity. This is why, understanding Syrians' collective identity requires us to trace their father's life story, which constitutes the collective memory of Syria today.

In this chapter, I consider the Syrian Prison a living being. Today, its life story continues to be written with the blood of society and on the bodies of its children. This is not just a prison 'story,' it is an autobiography filled with symbols of savagery. An autobiography is based on what a living being *does*, not what it *is* (Smith & Watson, 2010: 18). The Syrian Prison's autobiography reinforces oppression, shaping Syrians' culture and history. In doing so, it shapes their identity.

This intervention starts with a set of questions. How is the prison's autobiography produced without official sources and historical documents? How do the life narratives of former prisoners contribute to building the collective autobiography of the prison? Are the witness accounts of former detainees sufficient as the sole source for this process? What about oral histories? How can I, a former political prisoner myself, interview others to collaborate on writing the autobiography of the Syrian Prison that lives through us? If it is possible to write the autobiography of prison, how can this work help us understand and reshape Syrian collective identity? How can this practice of life writing and memory work contribute to rehabilitating Syrian identity?

As part of the "Syrian Gulag Project," I have been working with dozens of interviews with former prisoners and their families, alongside historical and archival research, with the aim of writing the prison's autobiography. This chapter shows the contiguous and relational nature of this process. My research, the testimonies of my interviewees and my own lived experience of political incarceration are implicated by and woven into each other. The writing of these entangled lives inside and outside of prison guides us to complete the autobiography of the Syrian Prison.

Prison Autobiography

The development of Syria's political prison has its beginnings in the arrest of opponents of the French occupation of Syria between 1920 and 1946. Some of those arrested later participated in building the first national governments, whereas others joined the ranks of the opposition or even decided to leave political life altogether. After Syrian independence and the first military coup in 1949, the prison became an institution used by the government to keep its opponents out of the political arena by arresting them. When the Arab nationalist Baath Party came into power in 1963, the prison became a place for harbouring opponents for long periods of time to remove them from public political life. In the early 1970s, with Hafez al-Assad's rise to power, the prison was used for the final and permanent expulsion of his opponents. In the early 1980s, the prison became a place of genocide, as it became the site of the Tadmor massacre in 1980.[2] Since 2011, Saydnaya Prison has continued to function as a place of extermination for political dissidents, just like it was with Tadmor.

Throughout all these years and events, the prison walls, which were supposed to mark the borders of a space of confinement from the political

life outside, have become something else. The history of political incarceration has become a prominent part of the Syrian political consciousness. For those of us who have been inside, the prison has become a ferocious creature that lives with and through ourselves, constituting our collective consciousness.

The prison's direct victims are current and former prisoners, those who went missing and those who were killed in torture. Its indirect victims are the families and communities of these direct victims. Do we have the right to add the wardens and their families to the section of indirect victims? Are they victims and, simultaneously, tools in the hands of this savage being, the prison? I do not know. What I know is that as I write these lines, most Syrians inside Syria and in the diaspora are prisoners. The Syrian gets out of prison, but the prison does not leave his life. Instead, he carries a painful mark, like the mark of slavery. However, no matter how deep it is engraved in the human skin, the mark changes day by day, dependent on habituation and the advancement of age, which pushes this mark to disappear, changing its location and/or shape. This change, however, does not mean the absolute absence of imprisonment.

The former detainees hold a responsibility to collectively write the prison's autobiography in order to commemorate their comrades, especially those who have died. The prison comrades are an integral part of the prison's life story. Abbas Mahmoud Abbas, in writing his autobiography titled *Yearning for Life* (2015), recorded the biographies of his comrades more than his own life story. As Abbas put it,

> I am a prisoner or a free one, the weaker party in the account book, a debtor, and chained until further notice with two restrictions, one of which is that I was born in the gap between national independence and 'national' enslavement and that I remember the first as a dream, and live the second as a nightmare. (2015: 35)

The prison used by the regime of "national enslavement" as a tool to oppress the people, thus, turned Syria into a giant prison.

Prisoner Autobiography

On the day I was arrested in the spring of 2002, I was a student at the university studying machinery and engines. My view of the world was confined to physics and, as a mechanic, its etheric principle was close to my

heart: every action corresponds to a reaction equal in force and opposite in direction. When the action of my arrest was met with a strange response, I realised that physics does not apply to humans after all. After my first months in prison, in this violent, cruel, and bloody house, I was excited to discover people whom I had never dreamed of meeting: a group of educated political prisoners, who were some of the most self-aware and knowledgeable individuals. They used their years in prison to think about themselves and their experiences and narrated them to those new prisoners as if they were passing on to them something from their personal lives. Without realising it, I decided to surrender to the act of my imprisonment and turn my time there into an enriching experience.

I listened carefully to the life stories of dozens of detainees, some of whom were arrested before I was born and had been in prison for more than 20 years. I gave them my ears, my time, my mind, and my memory. In the prison, they recalled formative political and life experiences, relationships, mistresses, children, parents, and enemies. I started recording everything in my head, as paper and pens are forbidden in Syrian prisons. This experiment lasted for two whole years. Some stories were repeated, and with repetition, parts of the story were added or deleted. Through additions, removals and mental paraphrasing the oral stories of my comrades' lives were built.

This 'mental writing' presents multiple histories of political or religious groups, families, nations, and political, religious, and military movements. As such, mental writing and oral stories maintain a unique relationship with the world it references. Additionally, because the stories were narrated in a prison, they were profoundly impacted by its climate of anxiety and fear, but also by its freedom, which showed itself, especially in the development and consolidation of relations between prisoners, a kinship that emerged out of this shared experience. Prison in Syria is, in many ways, paradoxically, a freer space than many spaces encountered in life outside prison. In prison, you are surrounded by people like you, so you quickly feel safe and confident.

Interviews undertaken with former prisoners continue the prison's autobiography. Prison is a life that begins with arrest but does not end with release. Arrest is a death. Release is not a return to the previous life but rather a birth in a new world, a conscious and aware birth, which the detainee remembers well and in detail. A detainee is born after imprisonment with a different way of looking and moving, giving the impression that his skin and features were recreated there in prison. They now use a

unique vocabulary and new ways of speaking all of which were made and developed in prison. He is born with a new lineage, as a member of a family that expands and grows with the days. He is born with a unique identity that may be completely different from the one he lived by before his 'death.' By narrating their lives in prison, the former detainees try to make sense of this lived experience by crafting meaningful memories. Through the verbal or textual writing process, they seek to record their experiences with that living being called the prison, whose shadow accompanies them physically.

"For more than eight years, I was forced to go to the security review periodically. … During those years, when I entered the [General Intelligence] building, as soon as it became parallel to the stairs that lead to the basement of the prison, I would look at it angrily, then pass it—rushing towards the waiting desk, as if I were fleeing from a monster that was hunting me," writes Najm (2015: 213). This surveillance affects all Syrians. Various branches of security and intelligence occupy the centres of cities with fortified buildings, and military and civilian prisons are scattered on the outskirts of major cities. Security branches or prisons exist openly but are nevertheless veiled by secrecy. Just like with leprosy hospitals in medieval Europe, they were known geographically but shrouded in mystery and danger because their inmates were punished by God. Despite the significant presence of intelligence cars and agents in the streets of cities, the mystery surrounding it makes the prisoner's autobiography closer to a legend that tells of an unbelievable experience. The prison thus turns into a dangerous mythical being and those who know it appear to have no right to talk about it except in whispers and secrets. Talk about prison takes place in the corridors of opponents of the regime. Talking about prison defines your political identity as an opponent to those in power.

The Prison's Autobiography After the Revolution

After my release from prison in 2004, my work with underground human rights groups in the country led me to meet many former detainees, who had been with me in Saydnaya or other prisons. I did not share any details of my life in prison with my family, especially the torture I was subjected to and witnessed there. I kept the story a secret, but I met those whose autobiographies I had gotten to know in prison, and I was curious to hear about their current lives. Those who were single got married immediately after their release, and they began to mention the prison to their partners

by its name without detailing their personal experiences. Their marriage or engagement was a way to start a new life, as no sweethearts were waiting for them after so many years in prison. Thus, they got engaged or married and even had children quickly as a reaction against the prison, which is always characterised by death and absence. They decided to remain silent so as not to burden their new life companions with stories about death and torment and perhaps also to forget the prison.

I also maintained close ties to my imprisoned kin for years until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. The revolution was comprehensive and intensely present, so we were all preoccupied with its daily activities, demonstrations, preparing field hospitals, communicating with international media, and aiding families who quickly fled the violence in different regions. I lost contact with my imprisoned comrades. The widespread arrest campaigns by the Assad regime that accompanied the beginnings of the revolution quickly brought about an intra-Syrian dialogue about the imprisonments predating the revolution. Dozens of revolution detainees were either former detainees or children, wives, and husbands of former detainees. Some were the children of former detainees who had gone missing in Assad's prisons from the 1980s onwards. They announced the story of the forced disappearance of their fathers as part of the narrative of the revolution. Violent stories told publicly about detention after the revolution were intertwined with autobiographies of former prisoners from Syrian prisons. These books began to spread as electronic copies among Syrians with the speed of fire consuming a dry haystack. The prison became more and more present in the daily lives of Syrians. Testimonies of imprisonment, detention, and torture were publicly published on social media. Dozens of social media pages were quickly created to demand the freedom of specific or all revolution detainees. Mobile phone camera clips of security forces torturing prisoners during their arrest at military checkpoints or raids in rebellious cities were leaked. What was going on behind closed doors before 2011 was now public, out on the street, and published on social media platforms. The new and widespread detention affected thousands of people during the revolution, leading them to connect the story of Syrians' imprisonment to the time before the revolution. This linked the past uprising between 1976 and 1987 to the present one, leading Syrians to represent the prison not just as an institution used to suppress opponents of the regime, but as an integral part of their identity.

Violence in Syria today is open and direct, and in this terrifying environment, the prison remains an entry visa into the world of revolutionaries. It was enough to be detained for a few days during the revolution to meet and trust the older detainees whose imprisonment preceded the revolution. As the Syrian Prison devoured new detainees and its lineage grew, so did the solidarity among its children.

This overlap between past and present imprisoned lives prompted revolutionaries and Syrians to search further for the memories of the prison. The most prominent autobiography of prison life is Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* (2017 [2006]). This was followed by autobiographies of Jordanian detainees who were detained in Tadmor prison in Syria. These works were disseminated through the Revolution Coordination pages on Facebook or sent from one reader to whomever he trusted among his comrades.

Most former detainees or children of former detainees with direct experiences of prison have not read these works. They do not need them. I did not read Khalifa's book until the day I wanted to interview him, three years after the start of the revolution. When I read it, I discovered that I knew most of the stories he wrote already from conversations with the former detainees whom I had met in Saydnaya prison and who had previously been in Tadmor prison.

Assembling the Prison's Autobiography

Prisons were everywhere, as homes, schools, stadiums, and even civilian and military hospitals were all turned into bloody prisons with the function of silent extermination. With levels of violence rising, Syrians carried the prison as an identity with them into the diaspora to the various countries to which they fled. The prison has maintained a prominent position in the lives of Syrians. In this way, the prison, as a defining aspect of identity, extended beyond its physical boundaries in the basements of security and intelligence branches or military and civilian correctional facilities. So, a year after I arrived in my country of asylum, France, in the spring of 2014, I decided to embark on a journey documenting sexual violence in Syrian prisons as part of a documentary film. Unfortunately, the movie had problems getting funding, so it was stopped. Instead, the novel *601 Divine Trials* (2017) was born.[3]

My novel about Military Hospital 601 is a fictionalised biography based on an acquaintance who had passed through this place and now resides in the Netherlands. That fictionalised biography prompted me to navigate an

archipelago of oral prison autobiographies. During a signing ceremony for the novel in an Arab bookstore in Amsterdam at the end of 2017, I got to know Professor Uğur Ümit Üngör, who asked me the question, which marked the beginning of the Syrian Gulag project: do we have a book that includes a map and an introduction to all Syrian prisons?

I pondered and analysed interview questions, based on my extensive reading of autobiographies of former detainees, and arranged a list that included more than 160 questions. The interview is a journey that I go through with former detainees, from the day of their birth until the day we meet, passing through the details of their family, their life, and their upbringing before arrest and death, and then, prison life, from the first day that always remains engraved in the prisoner's memory. "The first day is a milestone that long years in prison cannot erase, it sticks to you like your skin, and you write it down in your mind or on paper, not as an item in a prisoner's diary" (Abbas, 2015: 55). That day is recorded by the prisoner as both death and birth, not on the level of the individual but on that of society. The former detainee deals with himself as an embodiment of society's desires for freedom and dignity, conceiving of his arrest the arrest of the entire community.

The interviews do not end with the questions. To this day, I maintain relationships with those I have encountered, as we met over days and sometimes months to talk about these exceptional experiences. Talking about prison is like having an affair that ends tragically, an eccentric love. The prison evokes fear, anxiety, and death, but it is something you cannot erase from your memory. Prison is the search for meaning and resistance, and it shows you aspects of your personality that you were ignorant of, positive or negative, and which remain with you. "Within this prison, we tried to create our world as much as we could, to fill the emptiness of our lives, and to overcome its deadly monotony," writes Najm (2015: 163). The experiences of prisoners differed in how they fought the heavy time that seeped into their lives.

The interviews were a journey of digging slowly into the memories of the prison's victims. Although ex-detainees are often forced to wear thick blindfolds, constructing an image of the prison's architecture and physical elements is not difficult. Detainees develop alternate tools to build and explore their world. They translate and connect the sounds they hear to the things they take a peek at from under the bandanas. The voice of the interrogator who tortured a detainee is preserved by the latter in the depth

of his memory. The day he returns to the branch again and meets him face to face, he connects the sound directly to the image.

In such circumstances, humans are forced to be creative and come up with new mechanisms. "We created a language of communication called Morse. It is based on numbering the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and each letter now has a number corresponding to it. We knock on the wall separating the cells with the numbers of the letters we mean and the message is communicated. After years, Morse became an easy and daily way to communicate and exchange even poems, not just the names of the dead." This is what Faraj Bayrakdar told me the day I met him in Amsterdam while I was working on the Gulag interviews in 2019. In interviews with other detainees in Tadmor prison, most shared stories about Morse with me. It was a way of conveying important information: the names of those who were executed, dates of their birth and death, which part of the prison they were in, and which city they were from. Among the prisoners, some volunteered to be the 'custodians,' to protect this information and keep it in their memories until they were released, after which they would pass it on to the families of the deceased. This practice was a way of documenting prison diaries. It was a sharing of information, a social medium for the prison in which speech was prohibited, now told to me in oral form.

Writing the Prison's Autobiography

But how to *write* an autobiography of the prison? We know more about this living being through its victims than through official documentation or its physical existence. As researchers or historians, we have yet to have the opportunity to enter Tadmor prison, Saydnaya, Mezzeh, or dozens of other security branch prisons. We have yet to be allowed access to the archives of these prisons or those of security services. Can we identify the criminal by only looking at his fingerprints and other traces on the victim's body?

In its autobiography, the prison would write about how it tortured its victims. How do its operatives execute its victims? How do its members hide the bodies of its victims? How are they arrested? How are they prosecuted? The autobiography of the prison is the autobiography of this living being, written by the hands of its victims and executioners. Those memories that we dig into deeply intersect with some documents leaked from the institutions of this system. Caesar, a Syrian military photographer who defected from the military police, left us in front of dozens of

photographs of corpses bearing multiple signs of death: starvation, medical neglect, torture, execution, and firing squad. This is another side of the prison autobiography.

Shaping Syrian Identity

Syrians have suffered from an absence of a national identity since the establishment of the current state. They emerged from under French occupation in 1946 only to find themselves subject to a series of military coups that began in 1949. Then came the rule of the Arab Socialist Baath Party in 1963 with its Arab nationalist tendencies, which disrupted the Syrian national borders without regard for the fact that not all Syrians are Arabs. During the rule of the Assad family since 1970, Arab nationalism was absent. The method of ruling by corruption emerged, and it was armed with many tools. The most prominent tools of this method of governance were sectarianism and violence. Additionally, imprisonment was one of the regime's most prominent weapons, as the prison directly suppressed Syrian identity and prevented it from forming in a manner both ruthless and coercive.

"The suppression of identity through imprisonment, arrest, torture, and persecution may turn into a sudden revolution; the identity lies but does not disappear. Identity is the originality of existence, which is nonexistent by its absence" (Hanafi, 2012: 55). Syrians have attempted to rise up to restore their existence at least twice in recent history, for the first time in 1976 with the uprising of trade unions and leftist parties, and later with the Muslim Brotherhood against President Hafez al-Assad. The Assad regime punished the entirety of Syrian society, especially in oppositional areas such as the cities of Hama, Aleppo, and the countryside of Idlib. This punishment took the form of a series of massacres, the largest of which was the Hama massacre in 1982, which declared the end of military operations against the regime. Besides that, the prison continued its silent extermination of opponents.

Syrian political transformations are intrinsically connected to the role of the prison, which allows it to play a profound role in the shaping of Syrian identity, particularly in terms of its suppression of freedom. The Syrian people who desire freedom express opposition to the regime, but then quickly hide their views for fear of imprisonment, which the regime uses as a tool for repression and revenge. The prison has represented terror for

Syrians over the past five decades. However, if we understand the prison's logic, we could break this cycle and lead Syrians to the freedom they seek.

Societal fear largely prevented former prisoners from coming to terms with their former imprisoned selves, except in secret—sometimes among family members, but always with those families that were formed in prison. The former prisoner is prohibited from working in any governmental institution. He is expected to start a family, as required by the community's traditions, but he faces rejection out of fear for his past. A female detainee may find her husband preventing her from seeing her children and fleeing with them. She has become an unbearable social burden for her family. "It can happen that some incident, a fortunate or unfortunate accident, even a chance encounter, influences our sense of identity more strongly than any ancient affiliation" (Maalouf, 2003: 11). With time, the prison becomes the former detainee's primary identity. Imagine living with a significant event that took many years out of your life without being able to express it, except in secret. Even in underground human rights groups, over time, they will feel tired from your stories repeating the same painful experiences of death and torment. Many in these societies demand that you forget that pivotal period and move on. But move on to where?

The Syrian regime continues its reliance on prison as a tool for oppression, solidifying it as a central element in the personalities of its opponents. In response, the experiences of detainees have become a central part of revolutionary activity and identity. The slogan 'detainees first' captures the prison's inscription into Syrian political consciousness. This political principle may, at present, be an expression of the moral importance of the detainees' case, but at the same time, it is an old contention, as advocating for the missing and disappeared has continued to emerge since the uprisings of the 1980s.

When I got out of prison, I became close to secret human rights societies in Syria. They had listed nearly 15,000 people as missing. Today, human rights organisations and the United Nations are talking about more than 100,000 missing persons. These facts summarise the history of the Syrian identity since Hafez al-Assad took power and the prison's transformation into a living, savage creature that feeds on the lives of Syrians. The Syrian Prison is alive, dynamic, continuous, and developing. We face a living organism that permeates society through its victims and executioners. The life of this being crosses into the public space through its physical presence—buildings, detention centres, vehicles, weapons—as well as its immaterial presence—its psychological and social effects, and secret and

public narratives about prison life—thus provoking a heavy fear that weights on the chests of all Syrians. We are now creating a different autobiography, written by the hands of the living cells of this being, those of the victims and perhaps one day by those of the executioners.

Prison Autobiography as Resistance

By collecting and investigating fragments of the prison autobiography, I try to understand and analyse the impact of the prison on Syrians at home and abroad. Syrians today are almost all over the world: there are one million Syrians in Europe and the total number of Syrians in the diaspora today is seven million. To understand the impact of imprisonment on them, I must understand the depth of these people's prison experience.

The depth of the harsh experience in prison resides in the heinous violence that the prison practices through its executioners on its victims, and then the human values collapse. After all, underneath the polished layer of laws, culture, and urbanisation, man is an animal with a survival instinct that primarily defends itself. Does the executioner kill his victims through torture to ensure that he does not have to take their place? Does he escape from death by causing the death of the other? This perpetual striving for survival cancels out dreams and desires. It transforms the feelings and spirit of the Syrian person into fuel that burns in his journey for a permanent escape from Assad—a literal and psychological escape. Dreams are no longer about happiness but about acceptance of life. How can this acute lack of emotions and the sense of inferiority it translates into be compensated for?

Many former detainees today have become prominent writers and poets with works translated into several languages, some have become politicians or have formed successful families, and others have become wealthy businesspeople or famous doctors. Some former detainees lost their ability to live and were driven to insanity or returned to Syria to place themselves at the mercy of the executioner. The former detainee may feel lost. He may commit suicide by throwing himself from a high place, as Nasimm, a friend of the author, did in the book *The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer* by the Syrian writer and former detainee Mustafa Khalifa or as Mazen Hamada did by returning to Syria. Perhaps he is waiting for the opportunity to reveal his identity and take the second path: the path of violence and aggression (Hanafi, 2012: 25) or of venting his anger through

various forms of addiction. Whoever loses his identity loses his ability to move and be active. The life of the prison takes over his own life.

Notes

1. This quote comes from a long discussion, a large portion of which was published in the *Search for Meaning* podcast series that the author founded in collaboration with Syria Podcast (2020).
2. On the morning of Friday, June 27, 1980, the day after the assassination attempt on President Hafez al-Assad, "two units of the Defense Brigades in field uniforms, led by Major Moin Nassif, Rifaat al-Assad's deputy and his son-in-law, carried the men from Mezzeh Airport by helicopters to Tadmor. At half past six, he headed half of the force, about sixty people, and drove to the desert prison by car. They split into six or seven groups and fired at the dormitories with orders to kill everyone inside. 500 prisoners were killed. It was later said that the prisoners had been sentenced to death by a field court with exceptional powers to bring legal cover over the massacre" (Seale, 1989). These are the words of Patrick Seale in his book *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (1989). "Many soldiers entered the prison a few minutes before nine in the morning. Their shoes hitting the ground make a loud noise. They stood on the wall of our dormitory overlooking the third courtyard, awaiting orders. Armaments began to be stockpiled, and the number of guns was huge. Our eyes wandered around the room, and no one said a word. Usually, it is forbidden to bring weapons into prison courtyards. Fear seized us, but no one had the power to question or inquire. Then, at precisely nine o'clock, they threw hand grenades into the fifth and sixth dormitories crowded with detainees. Bombs were thrown from the window overlooking the courtyard. The detainees started shouting and chanting. Finally, the soldiers opened the dormitories' doors, except ours, and started firing heavily at everyone. The detainees' voices were slowly lost behind the whistling of bullets and the cries of death." This quote is from an interview I did with the former detainee, Khaled Al-Oqla, for special research on Tadmor Prison.
3. *601 Divine Trials* (٦٠١ المحاكمات الإلهية) is a fictional biography. In 3 chapters and 215 pages, the book depicts 24 hours in the violent chain of imprisonment and torture in Syria amidst a revolution turned a war, based on testimonies of a few survivors of the notorious Syrian regime detention centres. Throughout those 24 hours, the scenery changes every 15 minutes, which is the slot given to each protagonist to tell their side of the story. Through these narrations, each character engages us in their personal disclosure, letting us into their world of thoughts and ideas as their world, slowly and painfully, crumbles down. We observe the divulgence of personal histories

that led to these moments of distress, and we bear witness to the agony of regrets, unfulfilled wishes, and lost dreams. The book came out after three years of interviews and a compilation of human rights violations narrated by the few Syrians who survived some of the Syrian regime's most notorious detention centres. Though fiction, the book is strongly grounded in real-life personal experiences and narratives that have been unfolding before our eyes. The key testimony that helped this book see the light is that of Zaid. Zaid was one of the very few survivors of the infamous Military Hospital in the Syrian capital, Damascus, also known as "601." The events that led to his survival do not follow any logic but depend on pure luck and coincidences—an element which probably adds to the parody of life and death that this book represents. Zaid is currently a resident of Amsterdam. In this book, I used imagination to move between characters and events. However, I also had to use poetic language to mitigate the impact of bloody and harsh events in the novel. Therefore, I used old mystical metaphors in places where such a story seems like a fantasy, as I made inanimate objects, doors, and torture tools speak and tell her story.

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