

MOBILIZING MEMORIES

Memory and the Language of Contention

Edited by Sophie van den Elzen and Ann Rigney



BRILL

Memory and the Language of Contention

Mobilizing Memories

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Introduction

Memory and the Language of Contention

Sophie van den Elzen

1 Stakes

For months following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini in custody of the ‘morality police’ in September 2022, protesters all over Iran chanted “Woman, Life, Freedom” [*Zan, zendegi, azadi*]. The chant is ostensibly a feminist slogan. It has been associated with International Women’s Day marches for over a decade, and voices apparently straightforward demands. Analysing this slogan on the level of its deceptively simple semantics, however, misses many of the grievances the phrase lends voice to, and much of its mobilising power. The cry channels memories of resistance against the Iranian regime which span over four decades. On a lexical level, the provocative juxtaposition of nouns conjures previous instances of widely mediated state violence against women, including the viral video of the deadly sniper attack on Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009. At the level of linguistic code, or *langue*, the choice of language in which the words are sung in turn marshals specific historical legacies. When the current resurgence of the slogan began at Amini’s funeral, mourners chanted it in its original Kurdish [*jin, jîyan, azadi*]. Amini was a Kurd, and the slogan recalls the opposition within this major ethnic minority to the Iranian regime. More specifically, it echoes the feminist ideas of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan – carrying an especially volatile association with Kurdish militancy. Finally, the slogan quickly became one of the few Kurdish/Persian phrases to gain global recognition both in translation and in the original, proliferating across banners, graffiti and magazine covers (Piller 2022). It became a cosmopolitan gesture, notably on the part of women, pointing past the thicket of sanctions, blockages and constant vilification that have plagued Iranian international relations since the regime change in 1979 (Sreberny and Khiabany 2023, 135–136). For Iranian protesters and the wider world alike, the phrase called up foreclosed and forgotten grassroots solidarities. The subtle memory work of the audacious cry, then, allows it to address different facets of Iran’s “conjunctural crisis” in one breath, and it is little wonder that its symbolism is intolerable to the regime (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023).¹

1 This discussion is indebted to Fatemeh Sham’s discussion in the *New Yorker*, “How Iran’s Hijab Protest Movement Became so Powerful” (2 October 2022) and Seyma Bayram and Diba

Sixties' Situationist philosopher Raoul Vaneigem observed that "one only has to pick at the scab of memory and the cries, words and gestures of the past make the whole body of power bleed again" (2006 [1962], 155). As protestors and authorities sense but rarely make explicit, words are carriers of memories.² They mobilise associations beyond themselves, operating both across space and historical periods. In doing so, they exert power *in the present* in intended and unintended ways. This volume seeks to contribute to a multi-dimensional understanding of how words exercise this power by drawing on memory. It presents historical cases in which memory inflects what Sidney Tarrow (2013) calls the "language of contention" at the level of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, in languages ranging from German to isiZulu, and Hebrew to Greek. Together, these cases show that language is a significant arena within the "memory-activism nexus" (Rigney 2018), the dynamic cluster of relationships between contentious action and the production of cultural memory. Writing from diverse disciplinary groundings, the contributors to this volume demonstrate different perspectives from which this arena can be examined.

2 The Memory-Activism Nexus

This volume is part of a broader surge of interest in the ways that memory and activism inflect one another, at the intersection of cultural memory and social movement studies. This research agenda has sprung from the realisation that, even though social movements' claims-making is oriented towards the present and future, memory is an important factor in the legibility of protestors' repertoire of action (Berger, Scalmer, and Wicke 2021, 1; Berger and Koller 2024; Merrill and Rigney 2024; Velásquez Urribarri 2020). Memories of past protest are moreover an indispensable source of inspiration, attachment and lessons for later activists (Bos 2014; Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie 2019; Traverso 2021; Vlessing 2023). The history of civic protest and the collective action of previous actors within a movement, narrated in differing ways by activists, historians and artists, thus shape the actions of protestors in the present (Koller 2005; Kubal and Becerra 2014; Rucht 1995; Tilly 2008, 16; Zamponi 2018). In addition to exploring contentious actors' dependence on a usable past, research continues to uncover how social movement actors safeguard their legacy by engaging

Mohtasham's discussion for NPR, "Iran's Protesters find Inspiration in a Kurdish Slogan" (see: <https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/2022-10-27/irans-protesters-find-inspiration-in-a-kurdish-revolutionary-slogan/>).

2 Joseph Stalin's open letter in *Pravda* in 1950, which aimed to shut down the 'Marxist linguistics' founded by Nikolai Marr (Stalin 2000 [1950]; Pollock 2006, ch. 5), is a noteworthy exception.

in memory work, ranging from storytelling to self-archiving and curating their cultural production (Della Porta et al. 2018; Doerr 2014; Eyerman 2015; Polletta 2006; Merrill 2023; Merrill and Rigney 2024; Rigney 2020; Rigney 2024; Salerno and Rigney 2024).

These insights have muddied the traditional separation between contentious episodes marked by frenzied, innovative protest activity and periods of abeyance (Tarrow 1993; Taylor 1989, Wüstenberg 2021). Historical examples of activists' investment of time and resources in memorialisation suggest it is not an afterthought, but a crucial part of their activities (Armstrong and Crage 2006; Tetrault 2014), and that much of this "activist memory work" is done outside recognisable cycles (Merrill et al. 2020; Merrill and Rigney 2024). The varieties of this work are part of the "memory-activism nexus" (Rigney 2018; see also Daphi and Zamponi 2019; Wicke 2021). This concept highlights how *memory in activism*, the ways in which social movements mobilise memory as part of their contentious action, *memory of activism*, the engagement with the history of protest in public memory through different forms of mediation, and *memory activism*, strategic efforts to "effect mnemonic change" in society (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023, 1), are closely interconnected. The latter form of civic engagement has become an increasingly important activity within contemporary justice movements and has become the subject of an "activist turn" in memory studies (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023, 5; Gutman 2017; Hamilton 2010; Wüstenberg 2017).

It is hard to overstate the importance of mediation to the memory-activism nexus. Mediation does not only connect movement actors across space within particular protest cycles, but also brokers across time (Chidgey 2018; Reading and Katriel 2015; Rigney 2020), presenting both constraints and opportunities. Recent studies confirm social movement actors' savviness with regard to media logics and explore the ways in which this critical awareness shapes their activities (Altinay et al. 2019; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Mattoni 2013; Merrill, Keightley and Daphi 2020). Ann Rigney and Thomas Smits' edited volume *The Visual Memory of Protest* (2023) set out to advance understanding of the mediation of protest in visual media, and the present volume (originating from the same research project at Utrecht University, *Remembering Activism* 2019-2024, dir. Ann Rigney) presents a similar step forward towards a fine-grained understanding of the linguistic mediation of protest.

3 Troubling Language and the Linguistic Turn

Language is not just a primal medium of memory but also makes itself felt as a powerful vector along all axes of the memory-activism nexus. As it moved past

the lay model of language as a transparent medium to be tailored to a speaker's needs, the past century has seen a tidal wave of interest in how language shapes processes of individuation, socialisation, and ideation – in short, shapes reality itself. The high water mark of this development has been the so-called 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1967). The groundwork for this was laid by new insights in linguistics and ordinary language philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century but, more apropos to this volume, it came into full force in a wide range of humanities disciplines in the 1960s/1970s, when scholars in literary studies, history and anthropology began to emphasise the inevitable role of language in world-making. Insight into this formative power of language is now shared across the multiple disciplines represented in this volume. To ground the chapters' different approaches to language as a complex system in which lexicon, grammar, and discursive conventions (praxis) interact in meaning-making, it is useful to briefly map out some key ideas generated by the linguistic turn in different disciplines before turning more specifically to the work on language in memory studies.

One of the principal insights is that any individual user of language steps into a system which, unlike the impression given by prescriptive grammars, is dynamic and has a history. Building on the nineteenth-century realisation that signs are conventional and that their meaning relies on their difference from other signs within a system (as opposed to their arbitrary real-world reference), the field of semiotics expanded the work of theorists like Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure from the 1960s onwards to focus close attention on the complex ways in which words function as signs. It shifted the emphasis to their manifold connotations, rather than their singular denotation (Eco 1986). Roland Barthes' monthly column analysing verbal and visual signs in popular culture and media (1957) applied semiotic insights to the layered, recursive process of social myth-making. Semiotic analyses showcased ordinary speakers' expansive cultural literacy, which allows for the rapid expansion of the connotations of words and phrases and their potential shifts of meaning.

A second key idea is that second order uses of language, such as narrative, can be analysed by analogy with sentence structure. Somewhat analogous to Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar, which spearheaded a key linguistic paradigm shift of the 1960s, the faculty for narrative emplotment is considered a human universal that helps to construct the social world. The fields of narratology and genre theory generated insight into the influence of emplotment and genre conventions as crucial structuring forces in collective experience. Originally rooted in Russian formalists' study of folktales in the 1920s, this body of scholarship posited a 'grammar' of storytelling that governs how plots, within specific cultures, recombine motifs in finite and predictable

ways (Todorov 1969). In the 1970s, postmodern scholars like Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and Hayden White (1973) applied such insights into narrative conventions to processes of social meaning-making. One important way in which sociologists, political scientists and media scholars have operationalised these insights for the study of contemporary culture is the development of 'frame analysis' (Goffman 1986) to investigate how media, movements, and public representatives rely on specific narrative frames and assumptions to selectively present reality.

Finally, a third abiding insight is that language is an important arena for the exercise of power, and that this power in large part depends on social conventions. With the establishment of the disciplines of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, sustained attention was brought to the pragmatics of language in use, as scholars began to map how language and speaking context interact. Researchers like William Labov (2006 [1964]) developed new ways of studying ordinary language use and demonstrated, for instance, how community and class identity inflect speech. This body of research raised awareness of the mutual shaping of language, identity, and society. It also brought to light how social conventions play into the meaning and effects of utterances in various contexts. In the 1980s, reader-response critics like Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser critically examined the role of convention, cultural education and socialised expectation in the interpretation of written text, showing for instance how specific cultural settings such as the classroom shape speakers into "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980). One of the most influential lines of philosophical inquiry into how cultural conventions govern language's real-world power has been speech-act theory. Inaugurated by J.L. Austin's lecture series *How to do Things with Words* (1962), this field studies how language can constitute action and function as a vehicle for individual speakers' agency. Moreover, chiming in with insights into the "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" within languages first formulated by the Russian circle of Mikhail Bakhtin, it has been usefully and extensively pointed out that utterances cohere with other statements, objects, practices and media in broader discourses (e.g. Fairclough 1992; Scollon 2014). Substantively under the influence of Michel Foucault's (e.g. 1969) work on power and the construction of knowledge, Critical Discourse Analysis developed as an engaged scholarly field which uses corpus linguistics to study how social and political power operates through discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2015). Through the quantitative methods developed in this field, scholars have not only revealed much about how features like word choice and grammatical mode serve the operation of power, but also contributed significantly to the understanding of media framing (e.g. Hall et al. 1978).

As this inevitably condensed overview shows, different disciplines within the humanities and social sciences have generated a rich body of insight into the nature of language as a system of words, sentences and broader discourses over the past century. The realisation that language is a changing system which narratively shapes cultural identity and perception, as well as a locus of power, particularly, holds relevance both for the study of memory and for the understanding of the language of contention. The chapters in this volume shed transdisciplinary light on the dynamics involved in the connection between language, memory, and civil resistance. Discursive action is, after all, a crucial element in the arena of civic campaigning, both on the part of activists and of state actors.

The chapters presented here showcase the “semiotic resources” different modes of discursive action offer grassroots and state actors to intervene in cultural memory (Machin and Mayr 2023, 21). By adopting a resource mobilisation perspective, well-established both in linguistics (Halliday 2014 [1985]) and in social movement studies (McCarthy and Zald 1977), this collection invites scholars, irrespective of predetermined disciplinary boundaries, to shift their attention to the creative ways in which people work with the rich variety of (cultural) resources at hand to change the world around them. Capturing this wealth of implicit, embodied expertise, the chapters that follow here have much to contribute to our understanding of the mediation of memory through language.

4 Language as a Medium of Memory

In his seminal work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), Maurice Halbwachs described language as a first but primitive, ‘slack’ social encoding mechanism (111; see also Assmann 2011 on this primacy).³ This idea has since been vindicated by experimental psychology, particularly regarding conversational narrative (Amberber 2007, 1; Bezdek, Zacks and Butler 2022; Hirst and Echterhoff 2012; Nelson and Fivush 2000). One of the most important findings of this research has been that the way speakers verbally narrativise (or ‘narratively encode’) events significantly influences how they are later recalled by what is commonly referred to as an individual’s episodic memory. Cultural memory

3 “Les conventions verbales constituent donc le cadre à la fois le plus élémentaire et le plus stable de la mémoire collective: cadre singulièrement lâche, d’ailleurs, puisqu’il laisse passer tous les souvenirs tant soit peu complexes, et ne retient que des détails isolés et des éléments discontinus de nos représentations” (111).

studies' interest in how texts mediate the past chimes in with this insight into the importance of narrativisation in personal memory, and has brought to bear on the study of cultural memory typically literary concepts and concerns, of genre, emplotment, narrative schemata, mimesis, canon-formation, and the relationship between trauma and 'tellability' (Erl and Rigney 2005; Erl 2008; Rigney 2015, 70–71).⁴ These structures and dynamics in memory are all firmly rooted in higher-order applications of language, and extensive verbal narratives with sophisticated formal characteristics are especially rich objects for their study. But they are not unique to written text. To date, despite its ubiquity, there has been surprisingly little structural attention for the specific semiotic resources language affords the mediation of the past.⁵ Conversely, among linguists attention to memory has been similarly subdued, leaving "history" (or for our purposes, memory) "the outlawed wanderer of linguistics" (Jacques Derrida quoted in Fabricio and Moita-Lopes 2020, 70).

Yet putting events into words does not only occasion recall in crucial ways; words themselves also structure that recall – making language an important "fabric of memory" (Courtine 1994, 10; Schiffrin 2006, 214ff.). Words, bringing vectors of their own to bear on memory, can work as narrative frames and even recall historical events, as Michael Walzer explored in his study of the frames conjured by the words *Exodus and Revolution* (1985). Word choice can also support the convergence of a multiplicity of experiences into a more unified account, help maintain this story over time, and connect dissimilar historical experiences, as demonstrated by Deborah Schiffrin's (2001) study of the propagation of the nouns 'Holocaust' and 'concentration camps' among Jewish and Japanese communities in the US.

In memory studies, much attention has been paid to the "communicative limits" of words, particularly when it comes to the impossibility of narrativising traumatic experiences (for a discussion of this trend, see Pickering and Keightley 2009). By taking semiotic resources as its focal point, this volume expands the scope of the discussion of language as a mnemonic medium by bringing into focus individuals' creative engagement with language – which is on full display in the context of contentious action. Word definitions have long been intuitively conceptualised as more or less static entries of the "generalized conceptual knowledge divested of a specific spatiotemporal context" that makes up the "semantic memory" of individuals (Irish and Piguet

4 See, for example, Assmann (2006, 2008); Caruth (1996); Erl (2009, 2014); Erl and Rigney (2005).

5 See also Mlynář (2014) and Erl (2022) on this lacuna. Notable exceptions are the Wójcicka (2014) and Czachur 2018; see also Bukowski (2018) and Wójcicka (2018).

2013, 1; Tulving 2002). Modern neuropsychological research, however, suggests that semantic content is in fact much more dynamic and reactive, which opens doors to understanding how memory also impacts language (Van den Elzen 2024). To a significant extent, words derive their meaning from their habitual association with other words – the patterns of co-occurrence in which they are uttered, or “the company they keep” (Firth 1957). Their coherence in particular orders of semantic and associative relationships, expressed in co-occurrence, shapes the narrativization of memory, but this order is not set in stone. Word choice, as a basic unit of memory work, comes to the fore as a major resource for (memory) activists: by narrating the past in new ways speakers can change the meaning of words and phrases.

This volume also chimes in with recent developments in the sociolinguistic study of collective memory, which has begun to thematise the significance of the material forms through which language presents itself in interpersonal communication, and the media dynamics at play in them (Deschrijver 2020; Dickinson, Blair, and Ott 2010, 3; Scollon 2014). In her study of the discursive conflict over the memory of the military’s actions during the Uruguyan dictatorship of 1973–85, for instance, Mariana Achugar analyses a range of genres, from editorials to commemorative speeches, drawing attention to the “discursive resources” they offer (2008, 21). More explicitly, in her study of the memories of late colonial India, Vaidehi Ramanathan (2019) studies the communication of memories in marginalised textual genres such as the telegram and explores their potential to reorient collective memory. This volume is similarly organised to accord the question of medium, and of medium-crossing, pride of place. Speakers make use of poetic, aural, kinetic and other affordances of language as it manifests in different media materialities to attune their individual stories to collective memory, and to modulate memory (see also McLuhan 2013 [1964], 83–96). Taking the setting of communicative memory as an example (Assmann 1995), speakers may for instance play with the rhythm of stress patterns to echo past utterances (Hill 2018, 105, 154), marshal particular semantic webs and historical allusions through their lexical choices (Ludlow 2014, 7–25), change their register or drop loaded terms depending on their audience (Scott 1990; Katzenstein 1995, 44–45), or adapt their narrative condensation to sharpen their account of an event for a particular context (Polletta 2006, 22–24). As words travel between genres and materialities, different affordances of language as a medium of memory come into play. Moreover, the affordances of particular media may be echoed in later remediations (Bolter and Grusin 1999, Erll and Rigney 2009), such as in the addition of an ‘exclamation’ mark to a written slogan.

Another significant area of research this collection builds on developed around the recognition that language is anchored in public space, and physically located in particular landscapes, in the form of graffiti, street signs, echoing chants, and banners. Linguistic landscape research, originally geared towards studying the language(s) displayed in public space and exploring the politics of multilingualism, has proven a productive lens for the study of public memory (Cenoz and Gorter 2006; Ben-Rafael and Shohamy 2016; Seargeant and Giaxoglou 2020). Two recent publications demonstrate the breadth of this research. The collection *Multilingual Memories: Monuments, Museums and the Linguistic Landscape* (2020) examines the surprising ways in which “multilingualism is memorialized” in a variety of public “memory places” (Blackwood and Macalister 2020, 2). Additionally, Maida Kosatica’s *Burden of Traumascapes: Discourses of Remembering in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Beyond* (2023) presents a study of how “traumascapes are produced through intricate forms of social interaction, communication and discourse” in the context of the “post-war semiotic landscape (e.g. monuments, minefields, ruins, graffiti)” (156–157).

Acknowledging that utterances are geographically as well as historically situated is of principal importance for any consideration of “defiant discourse” (Katriel 2021), which is by nature highly contextual and part of the public sphere. As the example of ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ shows, the choice of language can be a key way in which protestors position themselves in their environment and channel the voices of previous generations of struggle. Beyond this performative aspect, the choice for a particular language or register also influences what is ‘sayable,’ what stories are mnemonically available, and even what commemorative models are available (Amberber 2007).

Civic protests, grassroots resistance against the ‘normative environment’ of public discourse (Scott 1985, 186), and the language of contention are charged linguistic contexts, involving high stakes and inviting sophisticated communication practices. These contexts are rich, as they frequently host the clash and commingling of spoken and written expression, as well as the sprawling remediation of salient points and phrases. They throw everyday practices of mediating memory through language into sharp relief, foregrounding questions of agency, intentionality, and location. As scholars have come to recognise both the importance of language as a battlefield for social actors and the vanguard nature of activist language use, there is a growing body of work that studies what Sidney Tarrow termed the “language of contention” (2013). The present collection foregrounds the salience of memory in this important arena of activism, which has not been sufficiently addressed.

5 The Language of Contention

Polish émigré poet Czesław Miłosz once called irony “the glory of the slaves.”⁶ Indeed, James C. Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) and Benedict Anderson’s *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (1990) provide compelling evidence that language and linguistic *savoir-faire* do not just reflect political dissatisfaction but are in fact prime vehicles for grassroots resistance. This insight has been further developed for the analysis of contentious action from several vantage points which explicitly, or more often implicitly, involve attention to memory dynamics. The first has been to study the multiple functions of activists’ utterances in different contexts. In *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (2006), Francesca Polletta pioneered research into storytelling as a tool for protest. Her analysis highlights how subtleties of language use in the public recall of memories of grievance and past protest can have acute political consequences. Tamar Katriel’s *Defiant Discourse: Speech and Action in Grassroots Activism* (2021) also undoes the ‘talk vs action binary’ (29; see also Katzenstein 1999). In her study of soldiers’ “discourse-centered activism” within the broader contexts of Israeli speech culture and transnational anti-war activism, Katriel distinguishes between *proclaiming*, *witnessing*, and *accounting*, as three distinct “language-centered moves” which represent different forms of political intervention within the context of particular language ideologies (30). In *The Language of Protest: Acts of Performance, Identity and Legitimacy* (2018) Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill (2018) similarly draws on speech-act theory in order to analyse iconic activist utterances across different genres, including chants, songs, poems and prose. An important dynamic she distinguishes across protest utterances is that of ‘convocativity,’ whereby addressees are drawn into new communities which can act as a basis for further counter-hegemonic discourse (63–4).

Other scholars have sought to complement, or expand, the understanding of the action repertoire with the study of the *discursive* repertoire of contention. This is essentially a resource mobilisation approach to language (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The idea of the action repertoire transformed the study of social movements when Charles Tilly first proposed it in the 1980s (Tilly 2007, XIII–XIV). Tilly suggested that there is a limited set of culturally legible

6 From Miłosz’ “Not this way” (1972): “I protect my good name for language is my measure. / A bucolic, childish language that transforms the sublime into the cordial. / ... My voice always lacked fullness, I would like to render a different thanksgiving, / And generously, without irony which is the glory of slaves” (1988, 246).

tactics and performances, including such actions as boycotts, petition drives, and sit-ins, from which social movements select appropriate subsets to stake their claims. This repertoire is an evolving resource, Tilly and his colleagues (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) suggested, which has been developing and expanding since the early modern period, when extra-parliamentary collective politics began to be recognisable as such. Working within this framework, Marc Steinberg (1999; see also 1995) analysed what he called the “discursive repertoire” in terms of Bakhtinian dialogism, focusing on the socially contested nature of language in his study of English trade groups in the 1820s. Building on Steinberg and Tilly’s (2006, 2008) later works, Sidney Tarrow’s *The Language of Contention* (2013) examines not just how words unite and divide protestors but asks how “some words survive and diffuse as symbols of contention while others disappear or are absorbed into ordinary language” (13). He examines a range of keywords such as ‘terror,’ ‘rights’ and ‘male chauvinist pig,’ and develops a detailed framework, grounded in sociological rather than media principles, to explain the dynamics involved in the adoption of these words in new contexts. Other social scientists have additionally emphasised the importance of studying “repertoires of communication” alongside the discursive repertoire (Mattoni 2013), while Philip Seargeant’s illustrated *Political Activism in the Linguistic Landscape* (2023) showcases the potency of urban spaces as a linguistic resource for the evolving repertoire.

A third line of approach to the study of the role of language in contentious action has been to follow particular keywords in the protest lexicon as a metric of the thinkable over time. As Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing point out, words do different kinds of work as they travel through different contexts, including “organizing, mobilizing, inspiring, excluding, suppressing, or covering up” (2009, 3). Bordering on the history of ideas, this keyword approach has become a classic method for probing the associations and memories connected to particular words in a discourse (e.g. Bestor 1948; Williams 1985; Rodgers 1998). Following the model of Raymond Williams’ *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), which posited that transformations in word meanings indicated broader social changes, there have been several projects probing the shifting inner logics of (left-wing) intellectual projects through salient words (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris 2005; Fritsch, O’Connor and Thompson 2022; Leary 2022). Particularly fruitful have been studies of keywords for activist sociality (van den Elzen 2024), such as “the people” (Laclau 2005) and “comrade” (Dean 2019).

As a whole, this field of inquiry has demonstrated that activists make deft use of the full range of linguistic-cultural resources at their disposal, such as narrative schemata, genre conventions and (social) media affordances, to shape and disseminate their messages. This collection is focused on the

uniquely linguistic resources that spoken and written language offer for activist memory work. Across the domains of contentious language that make up this book, three stand out which cut across media and speaking contexts, and contribute to the potency of this primal mnemonic medium across the board. The case of ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ captures them in a nutshell.

First, words and verbal formulas, such as the three-word Kurdish phrase, are highly *economical* carriers (Krieg-Planque 2003), which have the potential to mobilise memories at several levels simultaneously because of their specific features, including the aural, compositional, graphic, and lexical. Second, they are arguably the most *portable* medium of memory (Rigney 2004, 383). Open as they are to extraction (or entextualization, Bauman and Briggs 1990), relocation, reactivation and recontextualization, they have an unparalleled potential to ricochet from local mourners to international football matches overnight and require no special skill to be taken up in sophisticated ways. Travelling freely, and travelling light, between the genres and media available in urban landscapes, they accrue further meaning along the way. It is quite possible that the twenty-first century with its superdiversity and (social) media virality has further destabilised already-unpredictable meaning-making processes, making mixed-method, multimodal semiotic approaches and linguistic ethnography more important than ever for grasping meaning (Blommaert and Rampton 2011, Varis and Blommaert 2015; Pennycook 2016). Thirdly, verbal formulas are *dialogic* (Bakhtin/Voloshinov 1994, 35; Dickinson, Blair, and Ott 2010, 4); in activist contexts, they are formulated in tension with the state, but also engage in a broader cultural dialogue with the citizenry and sometimes other protesters. Their utterance carries within itself a definitional struggle with potentially high stakes. Put differently, word meaning can be fundamentally and ongoingly social, when the word itself offers a structural invitation to debate and generates productive friction. As we will see throughout this volume, word choice can become hotly contested ground for different stakeholders in memory, and the frictions produced by the resignification of words and formulas often prove a key part of the contentious work they do. While this friction can take the shape of disputes over how the past ought to be represented, memory can also act as a potent resource for resignifying particular words in the present (Van den Elzen 2024).

6 Prospectus

Artists and speakers seamlessly integrate their “implicit collective memory” of language conventions and their history to produce sophisticated utterances

which activate and intervene in collective memory for the purpose of social change (Erl 2022). The chapters to follow stay close to this know-how of the actors they discuss, generating new insight into the semiotic resources languages offer in different contexts. The collection is organised into three sections, which represent core areas of the language of contention.

The first section, *Speaking Out*, focuses on how cultural memory inflects spoken and written testimonies: the domain that is classically known as *parrhesia*, speaking plainly, truthfully, and courageously (Dyrberg 2014, 2), and more colloquially, as *speaking truth to power*. Tamar Katriel argues that activist memoirs of the Israeli anti-occupation movement are a genre of ‘resistance literature’ which, by producing narratives, seeks to change public opinion and, ultimately, current policy. Besides representing powerful testimonies of activist experience, these memoirs, she argues, are a discursive site where activists engage with mainstream discourse. Katriel shows how dissenting authors display “communicative vigilance” in their engagement with the established language of the anti-occupation debate, strategically adopting terms in their account of the past that carry more or less of a “contentious edge.” Michal Kravel-Tovi discusses the intricate ways in which #MeToo activists and survivors in the Orthodox Haredi community use their testimonies of personal trauma not just as a way to confront abusers but also to challenge conventional language ideologies within their community. Bridging the gap between traumatic personal memory and the deep memory of cultural and religious convention, Kravel-Tovi argues for paying attention to how language ideology underpins witnessing and its cultural reception as well as to the potential of “discourse-based activism” to reshape communities’ modes of engagement with trauma. Natalie Braber discusses ongoing oral history work recording the testimonies of Nottingham miners regarding their changing community and role in the infamous mass miners’ strike of 1984–1985 in the UK. She demonstrates how decades of retelling stories within particular communities consolidated strong shared narratives that continue to sow division regarding the meaning of the past. Word choice and metaphor, particularly, continue to leave their mark on miners’ recounted memories of the historic protest in the present day. Giving testimony to an outside observer, such as an oral historian from abroad, however, has the potential to break open ossified disputes, and fissures may become apparent through close attention to witnesses’ language use. Finally, Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill explores how political actors attempt to capitalise on the language conventions of *parrhesia*, and the dangers this poses to the very workings of civic protest in democracy. Using speech-act theory as a framework to analyse official language conventions in public memory, she analyses Donald Trump’s speech of January 6, 2021, and the subsequent storming of the Capitol, as an “insurrection performative” which masks as a “protest

performative.” Her analysis shows how political actors posing as activists can engage in media manipulation to change the perlocutionary effects of their utterances, thereby intervening, after the fact, in their meaning.

The second section, *Word Work*, examines memory dynamics around keywords that belong to the protest lexicon. Nicolás Villarroel and Vic Riveros’ contribution analyses how a keyword of the Chilean political left, *compañero*, mobilises memories of left-wing sociality in different historical and contemporary circumstances. Building on the conception of dialogism formulated by the circle of Mikhail Bakhtin, they show how keywords can act as condensations of social relations in specific historical moments, and how governments can choose to repress them as such. After repression, different forms of linguistic socialisation are needed to restore these relationships in new generations, and later activists may choose to inflect the words with modern concerns while still paying homage to their historical pedigree. Hannah Grimmer’s chapter similarly deals with how certain keywords, most notably *el pueblo*, are used to mediate the left-wing legacy of the Allende presidency in Chile. Focusing on historic and contemporary artistic interventions which, despite their innovative use of new media, are nevertheless firmly rooted in the past, Grimmer explores how during the 2019 protests artists and protestors used the urban space to reclaim historically charged terms connected to Allende and his *Unidad Popular* campaign. Michiel Bot’s chapter sheds light on how states deal with the dangerous potential of words to mobilise the memory of political opposition. Offering a critical analysis of the linguistic work of the 2019 German Bundestag resolution against the pro-Palestinian BDS movement as well as a historical contextualisation of this intervention, Bot shows how the Bundestag attempted to reshape the meaning and historical associations of not just the term *boycott* but also of *Staatsräson*.

The chapters in the third section, *Slogans*, consider different ways in which memory inflects the lives of slogans, fixed formulas which often display poetic features, such as repetition, alliteration and puns. Zoé Carle’s contribution examines the afterlife of the iconic slogans of the student protests of May 1968. She charts the ways in which these were ‘immortalised’ directly after the event and how these efforts, which ultimately constrained the radical potential of the slogans, played into their assimilation into contemporary national heritage. Corinne Sandwith calls attention to the function of a selection of slogans that appeared throughout a flagship newspaper of the South African Left, *Umsebenzi*, in the 1930s. Taking as her starting point the finding that slogans can act as compressed narrative emplotments, she demonstrates how key slogans in this periodical engaged leftist protest memory from an anti-colonial perspective, challenging dominant postcolonial narrative modes. Tashina

Blom's chapter examines the further reaches of the sprawl of the nineteenth-century French anarchist slogan *No gods no masters*. Contesting the distinction commonly drawn between activist commemoration and commodifying appropriation, she argues that featuring the slogan on use objects and fashion items such as T-shirts can in fact marshal memories of historical anarchism – through the words but also through their materiality and the modes of production that come into play in their material instantiation. Finally, Maria Boletsi studies three common slogans that appeared in Greek wall writings following the economic crisis of 2008. She provides a close analysis of how these writings connect different layers of Greek memory and explores how they conjure the now obsolete grammatical mode of the middle voice to point the way beyond neoliberal binary logics of autonomy/victimhood.

As a whole, the collection shows the importance of language-specific resources, such as specific grammatical constructions, polysemy and language ideologies, for activist memory work. Language is revealed as not only a source of creativity but also a potential site for triumphant defiance of neoliberal, cultural and monoglot hegemony, as it can bring to life alternative historical intellectual trajectories. The chapters also show how it is not just persons, periods, traditions, and events that 'stick' to words, but that words' transcultural and transmedial travels can leave their traces too, adding layers of significance to their invocation in new protests. Moreover, memory work can involve intervening in these layers of meaning, as well as in the unwritten rules governing contentious language in a particular time and place. Finally, when taken together, the different chapters offer a powerful reminder of the breadth and variety of "players and arenas" in which contentious language does memory work, ranging from intimate confessions between comrades to the halls, and the walls, of government offices (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015). Ann Rigney's afterword returns to the volume's central question regarding the role of memory in activist language use. Observing how activists coin neologisms but also the efforts they make to preserve linguistic innovations, her reflections underscore how language helps to connect the struggles of the past to the hope for the future.

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PART 1

Speaking Out



Activist Memoirs and the Lexicon of Contention

Tamar Katriel

1 Introduction

Activist memoirs produced in the context of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles are a central genre of ‘resistance literature’ (Harlow 1987). In her seminal study of this literature – broadly defined in generic terms so as to include poetry as well as fiction and non-fictional writings – Barbara Harlow (1987) argues that its production and dissemination serves struggles for freedom and justice in more than one way. Resistance literature is part and parcel of these struggles and plays a central role in shaping their outcomes. It contributes to mobilising popular support, boosting activists’ morale, enhancing a sense of shared purpose, and fuelling resisters’ hopes. Beyond these immediate goals, this literature simultaneously serves the more long-term “struggle over the historical and cultural record” – a struggle over public knowledge and cultural symbols that “is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle” (Harlow 1987, 7). This chapter highlights the important role played by activist memoirs in the struggle over public memory. As cultural platforms for the construction and reconstruction of on-the-ground knowledge about grassroots resistance, these memoirs help to shape future memories, keep alive a lexicon of contention by providing a platform in which social-normative constraints over the use of controversial terms can be relaxed, and introduce a self-reflexive dimension into the work of activism.

Harlow’s study of resistance literature focuses on the prison memoirs of Third World political detainees and members of groups that are victims of oppressive regimes (e.g., Tamimi and Takruri 2022, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian context addressed here). These political prisoners’ memoirs are a subgenre of the category of activist memoirs, a broader category that includes another subgenre – memoirs written by so-called ‘allies’ (Bourke 2020; Leibovits 2023), i.e., dissenting members of an oppressor group, whose memoirs testify to their solidarity with members of an oppressed group through accounts of their activist engagements on its behalf. In publicising these accounts, memoirists consolidate their adoption of the complex position of ‘allyship’ through the employment of a historically and situationally shaped language of contention.

The author-protagonists of the memoirs discussed here are all Jewish-Israeli ‘allies’ of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and equality who have actively participated in grassroots actions in support of the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice that are routinely under-reported and remain under the radar. Through these activist memoirs, they construct an ‘ally’ identity and inscribe the stories of their activism in Israeli public memory (and beyond). A considerable number of such memoirs by Israeli anti-occupation activists have appeared in the past two decades, providing a particular angle on the larger story of resistance to Israel’s military control over the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Like prison memoirs, these memoirs are a politicised literary genre that draws on their authors’ personal experiences of the activist struggles in which they are implicated and constructs a discursive space marked by “communicative vigilance” (Frekko et al. 2015). This vigilance over the use of language is typically enacted through lexical and thematic choices that are considered highly contentious in mainstream Israeli discourse.

Given their authors’ complex ‘ally’ positioning vis-à-vis the Palestinians’ struggle, the activist memoirs written by Jewish-Israeli activists devote considerable attention to the process of their authors’ self-distancing from their society of belonging and the emergence of their dissident stance. Their authors’ participation in shared, border-crossing encounters with their Palestinian counterparts leads to intense reflections regarding their claim to an ‘ally’ positioning as a personal-political project.

Like all activist memoirs, the anti-occupation memoirs addressed here discursively construct a fleshed-out, singular persona out of the collective experience of social movement participation. As a form of memory work, they are carefully designed, retrospective accounts of past events that incorporate their authors’ present perspectives, simultaneously viewing “both the past and the person looking at it” (de Bres 2021, 9). Through the employment of a lexicon of contention, they recount their oppositional life trajectories as narratives of self-transformation that invite intimate accounts of inner turmoil and growing outrage at the scenes of oppression and humiliation to which their activist engagements expose them. At the same time they also register their efforts to sustain a sense of purpose and hope in their protracted struggle.

In exercising ‘communicative vigilance,’ anti-occupation memoirists pointedly avoid the mainstream lexicon generally used in the Israeli public sphere to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, they serve to de-normalise common usage by employing such provocative terms as ‘occupation’ or ‘apartheid’ as lexical markers of an alternative public sphere.¹ Thus, activist

1 Friedman and Gavriely-Nuri (2017) propose a ‘dialectic discourse analysis’ approach for the study of discourses that normalise and estrange the Israeli military control of the

memoirs delineate a counter-public sphere that largely consists of like-minded audiences who are willing to embrace their authors' dissident stance vis-à-vis Israeli hegemonic collective memory. The 'contentious edge' carried by the memoirs' lexicon of contention is context-specific and, as I will try to show, can shift in 'expressive force' over time. I conceptualise the discursive work performed by words carrying various degrees of 'contentious edge' in pragmatic terms, proposing the notion of 'pragmatic field' to capture the scalar relations of 'expressive force' within a particular assemblage of semantically diverse words that memoirists can 'weaponize' in challenging Israeli mainstream collective memory.

The proliferation of Israeli anti-occupation activist memoirs in the past two decades and the provocative language of contention they employ, need to be understood in relation to recent socio-historical changes in Israeli peace activism and the political positions they encapsulate, to which I now turn.

2 The Changing Contours of Israeli Peace Activism

The subtitle of a book that offers a longitudinal sociological analysis of the Israeli peace movement since its emergence in the late 1970s describes it as "a shattered dream" (Hermann 2009). Indeed, despite the signing of peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), both significant steps on the road to regional peace, Israeli-Palestinian relations have remained an "intractable conflict", as this conflict is designated in Daniel Bar-Tal's (2013) book title. On the Israeli side, Israel's political leadership and mainstream society are reluctant to face the moral conundrum of Israel's decades-long military control over millions of Palestinians in the territories of the West Bank and Gaza as well as the human rights violations and suffering it entails for the Palestinian population. The activists whose memoirs will be discussed here are part of a small, politically marginal minority that persists in advocating a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, their mode of operation testifies to a change in Israeli peace activism rather than to its disappearance – a change linguistically marked by its designation as 'anti-occupation activism' rather than 'peace activism,' a usage I will adopt throughout this chapter.

The socio-historical context for this change was recently addressed in an article by sociologist Uri Ben-Eliezer, who describes this new form of peace activism as promoting a "reflexive postliberal peace" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, p. 1). In this grassroots struggle, Israelis and Palestinians join hands in defying the

West Bank. My analysis proposes the pragmatic notion of 'contentious edge' to capture the role of lexical choice in verbal acts of resistance, as will be discussed below.

policies and practices of spatial and social separation that have been increasingly enforced by the Israeli authorities in Israel/Palestine since the early 2000s (and of which the Separation Barrier, or Wall, built roughly between Israel and the Palestinian territories in the mid-2000s stands as a stark emblem, see Katriel and Gutman 2015). This state of separation also shapes the political climate of suppression and denial that surrounds the issue of the occupation in mainstream Israeli society (Cohen 2001). Therefore, anti-occupation activist memoirs stand out as a significant cultural platform through which oppositional activities, the motivations behind them, the lexicon through which they are articulated, and the personal meanings attached to them, can be inserted into the Israeli 'public transcript' (Scott 1990). Thus, even though the goal of ending the occupation is not in sight, the discursive performance of enacting 'allyship' through lexical and thematic choices seeks to contribute to the struggle over the cultural and historical record of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Thus, beyond the more general ascendance of the memoir as an expressive literary genre in recent years (de Bres 2021), the changing face of Israeli peace activism has further contributed to the growing significance of the anti-occupation memoirs that have appeared since the early 2000s.

Echoing Tamar Hermann's observations concerning the failure of the Israeli peace movement, Uri Ben-Eliezer notes that when Israel and the PLO sought to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by launching the so-called 'Oslo Process' in 1993, "Israeli peace movements disappeared almost completely from the political map" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, 1). Yet, distinguishing 'peace movements' from 'peace activism,' he argues that Israeli peace activism has not disappeared but has significantly changed in the past two decades "in terms of organisation, orientation, and action" (Ben-Eliezer 2023, *ibid.*). The liberal, top-down approach that characterised the Israeli organised peace movement has been abandoned in favour of more de-centralised, dispersed, and radicalised forms of activism that constitute a self-reflexive response to the failure of the older Israeli peace movement. Ben-Eliezer analyses this change as a radical socio-cultural shift in the Israeli peace paradigm that emerged in response to earlier failures and involved trust-building grassroots practices of resistance and border-crossing encounters.

In this new activist climate, the organised mass demonstrations and public activities of the earlier peace movement have been replaced by the embodied solidarity activism of small grassroots groups, whose members venture out of their comfort zones to engage in solidarity activism that involves direct contact with Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories. This could take the form of sporadic acts of support such as joining solidarity visits, participating in witnessing tours in the scene of occupation, assisting Palestinian farmers

during the olive-picking season, protecting Palestinian shepherds from Jewish settler attacks, delivering food to besieged Palestinian villages in times of acute crisis, rebuilding Palestinian homes demolished by the Israeli military, monitoring checkpoints, and the like. These activist interventions are accompanied by the ongoing professional assistance offered by professional NGOs in legal and medical matters.

The memories of protest practices and reflections inscribed in anti-occupation memoirs remain largely invisible to mainstream Israeli society and are condemned – and often obstructed – by right-wing vigilante groups. The memoirs themselves circulate mainly in activist circles. Through them, their authors construct their oppositional stance and ‘ally’ identity through the use of a lexicon that challenges the Israeli hegemonic narrative of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the next section, I address a selection of Israeli activist memoirs as a deliberately crafted, multi-layered subgenre of resistance literature, attending to their linguistic “repertoire of contention” (Tarrow 2013, 16). In particular, I will address some of the ways in which they draw on the Israeli dynamic ‘protest lexicon’ (Elzen 2023), harnessing its contentious edge to their political struggle by exercising communicative vigilance. Avoiding the officially ordained and obfuscating vocabulary of mainstream Israeli discourse, they use the words ‘occupation,’ ‘apartheid,’ settlers (*mitnaxlim*), and settlements (*hitnaxluot*), terms that bring out the illegality of Israel’s military control and the Jewish settlement enterprise. In the following section, I will regard thematic choice as a discursive strategy, discussing, in particular, the ways in which some of these memoirists invoke the memory of the Holocaust, a central component of Jewish-Israeli collective identity, in such a way as to position Israeli Jews, the self-appointed inheritors of Holocaust memory, in the perpetrator rather than the victim role. This controversial claim to role reversal is predicated on activists’ acceptance of the reality of the occupation regime and their adoption of the controversial lexical choices used to describe it (as discussed earlier).

3 The Protest Lexicon in Anti-Occupation Activist Memoirs

The study of the language of contention as proposed by Sidney Tarrow (2013) follows the tradition of socio-historical language exploration. As in all instances of the use of contentious language, the author-protagonists of activist memoirs “draw upon a battery of language to describe their identities, their claims, their opponents, and their forms of action” (Tarrow 2013, 20). Their lexical selections from the protest lexicon signal their oppositional stance,

playing “an important role in the construction, the endurance, and the diffusion of contentious politics” (ibid., 21).

Protest lexicons are context-specific and subject to change. As we have seen earlier, the changing face of Israeli peace activism has resulted in a discursive shift from the designation of organised attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as ‘peace activism’ to ‘anti-occupation activism.’ This nomenclature stresses the power inequality between the Israelis as occupiers and the Palestinians as occupied. It also privileges the mainstream Israeli historical narrative that grants legitimacy to the state of Israel in its 1948 borders while marking the Palestinian territories occupied during the 1967 War as ‘occupied territories’ (as will be elaborated below). By the beginning of the 21st century, for more radical activists, the use of the term ‘peace,’ which had been widespread in grassroots demands for the inter-state negotiations that eventually led to peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, no longer carried a contentious edge. It was replaced by a pointed demand to actively ‘end the occupation.’

I clearly remember the day in which this lexical shift presented itself to me in the early 2000s. Coming back home, I found the living room floor of our apartment covered with anti-occupation signs my daughter was diligently preparing for an upcoming demonstration in downtown Haifa. As she was gathering her new signs in large bags, she asked me to help her get rid of a pile of discarded signs that were heaped in a corner of the room. I leafed through the no-longer-usable signs and saw they all included the word ‘peace.’ This made me realise that this word – so resonant for my generation of activists – was going out of circulation. For the young generation of activists, using the language of war and peace was no longer tenable. This language implied an unacceptable willingness to ignore the structural violence of the occupation regime. Having lost its contentious edge, the word ‘peace’ had become a deflated symbol, a marker of the political obfuscation associated with a never-ending ‘peace process’ that was going nowhere.

Radical peace activists prefer using the word ‘occupation’ as part of their lexicon of contention and – more specifically, and perhaps more modestly – describe their campaign as an anti-occupation struggle that demands an Israeli on-the-ground initiative rather than a quest for a utopian peace. Tellingly, the English version of David Shulman’s 2007 activist memoir, *Bitter Hope*, targeted to an international audience, carries the subtitle “working for peace in Israel/Palestine.” The subtitle of its Hebrew translation, however, does not include the word ‘peace’ (*shalom*) but rather describes the book as a selection from the diary of an activist in *ta’ayush*, one of the grassroots groups that emerged in the early 2000s.

In Israeli vernacular discourse, the word ‘occupation’ (*kibush*), its derivatives such as ‘occupied territories’ (*shtaxim kvushim*) and other occupation-related terms such as ‘colonists’ (*mitnaxlim*) carry a heavy contentious edge. The use of these words is studiously avoided by right-wing and even center-left Zionists. It is often frowned upon in current events broadcasting and often ridiculed in right-wing circles, at times through a belittling phonetic distortion (by pronouncing the expression *hakibush*, the occupation, as *akibush*, with an un-aspirated initial sound). Given its highly contested public life, choosing to use the word ‘occupation’ signals a speaker’s or writer’s positioning in the more radical left on the Israeli political map. Therefore, a major way in which anti-occupation memoirists construct their language of contention is by insisting, for example, on the use of the term ‘occupied territories’ rather than the term ‘Judea and Samaria,’ which is the toponym routinely used in mainstream parlance. These politicised lexical choices perform an indexical function (Silverstein 1976), signalling the memoir authors’ stance (Jaffe 2009), i.e. their self-positioning within the cultural-political debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and vis-à-vis their potential readers. The vigilance surrounding the use of occupation-related terms by anti-occupation memoirists is part of their claim to an ‘ally’ identity.

This communicative vigilance over the use and non-use of lexical items points to alternative constructions of collective memory and to alternative regimes of political legitimisation by different sections of Israeli society. For the Zionist left, ‘the occupation’ refers to the Israeli military control over the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza that began after the 1967 War between Israel and its neighbouring Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria). This usage implies a radical distinction between the territories included within the State of Israel upon its internationally recognised establishment in 1948, in the wake of an armed struggle that is inscribed in Israeli collective memory as the War of Independence, and the Palestinian territories Israel occupied in 1967. The Palestinians reject this distinction as this use of the term ‘occupation’ erases their claims to the territories from which some 750,000 Palestinians found themselves displaced in the wake of the 1948 War, unable to return. This massive displacement is inscribed in Palestinian memory as the *Nakbe* (Arabic for ‘disaster’). In Palestinian collective memory, the term ‘occupation’ applies to the whole land of Palestine, and restricting it to the territories Israel occupied in 1967 is a distortion of public memory (Gutman 2017).

Right-wing Israelis, too, pointedly reject the use of the word ‘occupation’ to designate Israel’s rule over the West Bank and Gaza. However, they do so on completely different grounds. Invoking an Old Testament divine promise, they

lay a religious claim to the whole land of Israel, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. In this context of divinely-ordained entitlement, the Palestinian territories are spoken of as ‘liberated’ rather than ‘occupied’ and the Israeli settlers lay claim to an age-old indigeneity in the land of Israel, considering the very use of the word ‘occupation’ a misnomer as “one cannot be an occupier in one’s own land” (*ein kovesh be’artzo*), as the settler saying goes.

Thus, through their ‘communicative vigilance’ around lexical choices, anti-occupation memoirists contribute to the political struggle over the collective memory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its political implications. Their use of such words as ‘occupation’ or ‘occupied territories,’ or just ‘territories’ or ‘the West Bank’ signals an Israel-centric yet dissident stance that challenges the legitimacy of Israel’s decades-long military control over the territories occupied in 1967. The official and vernacularly dominant Hebrew toponym for the West Bank, ‘Judea and Samaria’ (*Yehuda Veshomron*) with its Old Testament aura is not part of these memoirists’ lexicon.

A typical example of such usage is the term “occupied territories” as it appears on the first page of David Shulman’s second memoir, which helps set up its oppositional tone (Shulman 2018, 11). So does the subsequent mention of greenhouses “built by colonists (*mitnaxlim*) on stolen land” (*ibid.*, 14). The use of the terms *hitnaxlut*, ‘colony,’ and *mitnaxlim*, ‘colonists’ for Jewish settlements in the occupied territories – rather than the terms *hityashvut* (settlement) and *mityashvim* (settlers), or *toshavim* (residents) – carries a contentious edge. It constructs the Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 as a category apart from those who have settled in other parts of the country and thus points to their questionable legitimacy. For readers of these memoirs, this pattern of lexical selection works to normalise the language of anti-occupation resistance, producing a discursive echo chamber, a linguistic comfort zone in and through which anti-occupation activists can give voice to their dissident stance.

In fact, while the word ‘occupation’ still has a considerable contentious edge, its use has recently come into question because of the sense of temporariness it connotes. Arguing that the end of the decades-long occupation is nowhere in sight, some left-wing radicals, drawing on the global collective memory of South Africa’s past, maintain that the state of affairs in Israel/Palestine is more accurately described as a state of *apartheid*. They point out that the situation on the ground involves the upholding of two differentiated rules of law in the same occupied territory – a regime of military control over the Palestinian stateless population and a civilian regime for the Jewish settlers (Lustick 2019).

On the scale of contentiousness, then, the use of the word ‘apartheid’ (with the political analysis it encapsulates) is currently considered the most

contentious among the words used by activists in their attempts to de-normalise the status quo. The word 'occupation' still carries a considerable contentious edge in public debate. There were some signs that it was becoming less of a taboo following the outbreak of months-long mass protests against the government's planned overhaul of the judicial system in January 2023. In those demonstrations, anti-occupation activists participated in the mass protests as a recognised 'anti-occupation block' (*hagush neged hakibush*) and anti-occupation banners, signs and stickers became part of the protest landscape, if a marginal one.²

This indicates that the contentious edge of words that comprise the protest lexicon may shift over time. It is because of the lexicon's dynamic nature that the exercise of communicative vigilance is necessary. The shifts in the degree of contentiousness carried by particular words can be conceptualised in terms of a *pragmatic field*, which is on a par with the well-established linguistic concept of a *semantic field* (e.g., the field of related 'kinship terms' within a given cultural context). I use the concept of 'pragmatic field' to designate word assemblages linked in terms of their historically-situated contentious edge. In the foregoing discussion, the relevant assemblage includes calls for 'peace' as an aspirational term, calls against 'occupation' and 'apartheid' as terms describing an objectionable state of affairs, as well as invocations of the Holocaust that draw on the collective memory of the Nazi regime, positioning Israelis in the perpetrator role (as will be elaborated in the next section). In the case of this case-sensitive assemblage, the words 'peace,' '(no)occupation,' '(no)apartheid,' and some Holocaust-related terms will be part of the same pragmatic field. Pragmatic fields are not determined by *meanings* like semantic fields but rather by expressive *force*. The words included in a pragmatic field are not defined along *categorical* lines as in the case of semantic fields – 'father' and 'uncle' in the case of the semantic field of kinship terms – but rather in *scalar* terms that designate degrees of contentious force. While semantic fields are *synchronic*, pragmatic fields have both *synchronic* and *diachronic* dimensions, marking the degree of contentiousness that words in a particular assemblage carry relative to one another at a given point in time.

The author-protagonists of activist memoirs – like radical activists in other discursive contexts – exercise communicative vigilance when drawing on the

2 This chapter was written before the Hamas assault on Israeli southern towns and kibbutzim on 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent (and ongoing) war on the Gaza Strip. Notably, other terms have become prominent in the contentious lexicon, such as 'war crime' and 'genocide.' Exploring the uses of the lexicon of contention discussed here, including invocations of the Holocaust, in discourses surrounding these recent events must await further study.

particular pragmatic fields that make up their dynamic lexicon of occupation-related terms. At the same time, they avoid the use of hegemonic terms in discursively performing their oppositional stance. Through these linguistic means, they underscore their ‘ally’ identity in the context of solidarity activism vis-à-vis their Palestinian partners. In so doing, they also signal a particular positioning in relation to the cultural memory of Israel/Palestine, one that acknowledges the story of Jewish national revival and legitimacy as a home for persecuted Jews within the 1948 borders but rejects claims grounded in a religious-nationalist cultural memory that invoke ancestral roots and a divine promise. Anti-occupation activists neither support nor directly contest the Israeli erasure of the Palestinian memory of the 1948 disaster, the *Nakbe*. They recognise its dire implications for Palestinian life in following years yet their activist efforts generally centre on the ever-growing plight of the stateless Palestinians, who have been living under Israeli military rule since 1967.

4 Self-Positioning in Israeli Anti-Occupation Activist Memoirs

The Israeli anti-occupation activist memoirs addressed in this study are old-style, stand-alone books, each of which capitalises on the figure of a particular author-protagonist, who is engaged in resistance to the Israeli regime of control over the Palestinians through a variety of grassroots oppositional practices.³ This shared participatory experience of grassroots activism is at the heart of these memoirs. I elaborate on some aspects of this experience based on a corpus of six memoirs written by anti-occupation activists since the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Palestinian Intifada in the early 2000s, drawing on them selectively with an eye to the ways in which memoirists construct their self-positioning. In Helena de Bres’ classification, these texts represent modern and hybrid memoirs since they narrow in “on a particular aspect of the author’s experience: a relatively short time period, specific event, or select theme” (de Bres 2021, 11). These memoirs also include essayist elements that offer meditations on moral and political issues that amplify the narration of personal life events.

The author-protagonists of these memoirs, like many other anti-occupation activists in Israel, are middle-class, well-educated professionals, academics, and students, for whom writing is part of their life trajectory. Many are women, which is not surprising given the central role women play in Israeli grassroots

3 The memoirs addressed in this chapter include Chayut (2009), Hammerman (2016), Kirstein Keshet (2006), Nirgad (2004), and Shulman (2007, 2018). Translations from Hebrew texts in this chapter are my own.

activism as well as in literary pursuits. Some of these authors are widely recognised public intellectuals belonging to the older generation of left-wing liberal activists. The overall picture of the occupation regime the memoirs document is one of systemic and systematic abuses that routinely violate the Palestinians' human rights. Each memoir testifies to the ills of the occupation in particular times and places – winter at the Qalandia checkpoint (Nirgad 2004) or activist engagements in the South Hebron Hills (Shulman 2018). Each testifies to its author-protagonist's various attempts to confront or alleviate the abuses he or she witnesses. These personal memories take the form of anecdotal fragments, often written in a diary-style chronological order and employing a repetitive poetics of excess that invokes the grinding reality of protracted activist efforts.

By documenting scenes of life under occupation, these memoirs explain and legitimise the oppositional stance that fuels their authors' activism, providing glimpses of their personal motivations, fears, and misgivings. At the same time, they also bring out the joys of activism as highlighted in Carrie Hamilton's (2010) work – the small triumphs of occasional successes, the sense of self-liberation that may attend activist defiance, the exhilaration associated with border-crossing solidarity, the comfort of a shared lexicon, and the simple unanticipated pleasures of "doing things together" (Becker 1986).

A major thematic thread that runs through these memoirs involves narratives of moral awakening that tell the story of their authors' personal-ideological shift concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This shift is attended by a recognition of the Palestinian *Nakbe* as well as of Israel's role in perpetuating the hostilities through its occupation regime. The memoirists' individual paths to anti-occupation activism are thus narrated as tales of conversion that model the possibility of personal change, foregrounding the sense of purpose and hope the activist struggle may bring.

For some activists, as for David Shulman (2007), this change of heart and mind was a gradual process. Born and raised in the American Midwest, he was first drawn to Israel at age 18 by his love for the Hebrew language. He decided to stay and became a world-renowned scholar of Indian Studies, uninvolved in local politics. The initial trigger for the profound change he experienced in relation to Israeli politics was the country's shift from a left-wing Labour to a right-wing nationalist government following the 1977 elections. He recounts the impact of this political change in sharp terms: "The rise of the Israeli right, from 1977 on, shocked me, infuriated me, and undermined my faith in the world I lived in ... I watched in horror as Israel transformed itself into a paranoid, smug, and violent ghetto" (Shulman 2007, 4). His ensuing personal journey was a "slow, cumulative, and uneven" (*ibid.*) process, fraught with doubts and exasperation in the face of Israel's unrelenting occupation policies. After

ten years of “participating in demonstrations, listening to speeches and feeling foolish,” he volunteered one day a week in a legal aid organisation, *Hamoked*, that “conducts strategic litigation and advocacy against Israel’s violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.”⁴

Following his exposure to the Palestinians’ plight, in the early 2000s he became deeply involved with the anti-occupation group *Ta’ayush* (Arabic for ‘life in common’),⁵ a Palestinian-Israeli co-resistance group that was established in the fall of 2000, whose “consistent emphasis on action, in real time, on the ground” (Shulman 2007, 9) appealed to him. The story of his involvement with this group, the sense of border-crossing solidarity with Palestinian farmers and shepherds, and anecdotes of conflictual incidents with the Israeli military make up the bulk of his memoirs. These autobiographical episodes are interspersed with self-reflexive commentary on the significance his grassroots activism acquired in his life.

For other activists, however, the first step on the path to activism was an unanticipated jolt that resulted in a sharp shift in perspective and a prolonged process of self-questioning and political re-education. These led to growing doubts about Israel’s hegemonic collective memory as taught in mainstream schooling and as reiterated in mainstream media. Thus, for example, for Yehudit Kirstein Keshet, an activist in the checkpoints monitoring feminist group *MachsomWatch*,⁶ who moved from Britain to Israel as an ardent Zionist in search of a place of belonging, the radical shift in perspective that triggered her activism was a moment of epiphany. At that moment she realised that the Israeli hegemonic narrative of nation-building, which failed to acknowledge the Palestinians’ rights as well as their plight, was untenable. In her words:

My epiphany came during a conversation at a dialogue group in Beth Sahour, near Bethlehem, early into the first Intifada (1987–93). I was convinced that if properly presented, by me, the Israeli perspective would be accepted, the Palestinians would ‘agree to live in peace with Israel,’ and the Occupation could end. Our host at the meeting [...] retorted that Palestinians, too, feared annihilation, desired the Right of Return, wanted their national aspirations recognized [...] How banal [...] How Israel-centric not to have thought of it oneself. That moment marked the end of denial

4 The quote is from the *Hamoked* website (<https://hamoked.org/> (last accessed 31 July 2023)).

5 See the *Taayush* website (<https://taayush.org/> (last accessed 31 July 2023)).

6 See the *MachsomWatch* website (<https://machsomwatch.org/> (last accessed 31 July 2023)).

for me and resulted in a search for a new narrative of history [...] (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 4)

In this case the memoirist's change of heart was triggered by her Palestinian interlocutor's insistence that Israelis and Palestinians were entitled to the same political aspirations and to the same individual and collective rights, including the right to return to their ancestral homes, the right to self-government and freedom of movement and speech. Tellingly, her Palestinian interlocutor's piercing assertion of human dignity turned out to be a powerful transformative tool that launched Kirstein Keshet on a path of political self-education and grassroots activism. She turned to the memory of the Holocaust and not to the universal language of human rights to justify her change of heart. She invoked Holocaust-related terms, such as 'Nazi' and – in the Israeli context – 'bystander,' as warning signs to a self-positioning she was determined to avoid: "Remembering the silence of the majority during the Nazi/fascist period impels many of us to speak out, now, while there is still time" (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 42).

Noam Chayut's memoir (2009), too, tells the story of an unanticipated shift in his self-positioning by invoking Holocaust-related language and imagery. His shift of heart combined a growing sense of moral unease at the tasks he found himself performing as a soldier of the occupation with a moment of epiphany that jolted him out of his taken-for-granted position as the ultimate heir to Holocaust memory. Gun in hand as a soldier of the occupation, a chance encounter with a little Palestinian girl led him to the stark realisation that he was a perpetrator of evil rather than its ultimate victim, as Israeli schooling about the Holocaust had led him to believe.⁷

The very title of Chayut's book, *My Holocaust Thief*, underscores the centrality of Holocaust memory in the construction of Israeli identity and brings it into dialogue with the reality of the occupation. Chayut's narrative of transformation from self-perceived victim to victimiser, tells of an encounter with the Palestinian 'other' in which he is led to question the morality of his military role. He, too, does so by invoking the memory of the Holocaust, indeed by re-configuring the term 'Holocaust' and making it part of his lexicon of contention. He recounts that one day he entered a small Palestinian village as the commander of a few military vehicles assigned to patrol its streets.

7 Armed with this new understanding, he eventually joined the ranks of the veterans' organisation "Breaking the Silence," a high-profile anti-occupation NGO that collects, disseminates, and archives soldiers' personal accounts concerning their oppressor role in upholding the occupation regime (Katriel 2021). For more information, see the *Breaking the Silence* website (<https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>) (last accessed 31 July 2023).

Disembarking from the vehicle, he performed a routine procedure called ‘stormy deployment,’ which involves holding a gun in hand and pointing it in the direction of one’s gaze. In this case, this military posture of intimidation was performed close to a group of children immersed in play. As he stood there, fixing his gaze – and pointing his gun – at the playing children, the image of one particular little girl, who was transfixed in fear, became etched in his memory. In his words:

[...] she froze in her tracks, went all pale, and appeared horrified. She neither screamed nor ran, just stood there with a horror-stricken face and gazed at me with her dark eyes ... And then she wakes from her frozen state, turns around silently, a thin girl in bright clothes, and bolts away, without looking back, runs and disappears among the olive trees [...] (Chayut 2009, 59)

Deeply shaken by the girl’s obvious sense of horror at the sight of Israeli soldiers, Chayut comes to see himself through her eyes and begins to question the Holocaust-related collocation of ‘absolute evil’ (usually attributed to the Nazis), which grounded his view of himself as a Jewish victim turned into an Israeli soldier who defends his nation. He says:

She took away my faith that there is an **absolute evil** in the world and that I am fighting against it. For this girl I was the **absolute evil** ... The moment I understood that I was the **absolute evil** in her eyes, the **absolute evil** that dominated me till then dissipated. And since then I’ve been without my Holocaust, and since then everything in my life has been gaining new meaning. (Chayut 2009, 63, emphasis in the original)

The little girl’s gaze liberated Chayut from the hold of the collective memory of the Holocaust, depriving him at the same time of a moral shield against his growing sense of discomfort regarding his military pursuits. The process of self-examination and retrospective reflection that engulfed him brought back memories of the nationalist and militaristic socialisation he had undergone as an Israeli child and soldier, casting it in a new light. For Chayut, relinquishing the victim position and accepting the responsibility attached to his military role, spelled a new kind of freedom, a freedom to re-think his self-positioning vis-à-vis Israeli collective memory and question its implications through his activism in “Breaking the Silence” and through the writing of his memoir. In this process, the term ‘Holocaust’ shed its accustomed meaning as a distinctive

Jewish catastrophe, a semantic shift that led Chayut to feel that it was stolen from him, as the book title suggests.

Invoking the memory of the Holocaust so as to position Jews as perpetrators of evil rather than as victims of terrorism is a highly contentious discursive move in mainstream Israeli culture. Although this move has been identified as one of the narrative possibilities found in Israeli literature and film (Steir-Livny 2016), it is one fervently avoided in political discourse. This taboo against comparing Israelis to Nazis is highlighted by historian Idit Zertal's (2022) op-ed in the liberal daily *Haaretz*, where she refers to it as an intellectually crippling 11th commandment that Israelis have informally added to the biblical Ten, namely: "Thou shalt not compare." For Chayut, challenging the power of this injunction was a liberating step towards claiming responsibility and taking action.⁸

For David Shulman, too, as recounted in his second activist memoir (2018), taking the path of resistance spelled personal freedom, the freedom to reject a social order that placed him in the role of the oppressor. Rejecting this role, he sought to reclaim his sense of freedom by cultivating his 'ally' identity, openly supporting the Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and equality. He describes his newfound freedom as marked by moments of exhilaration at the very possibility of resisting domination, claiming to have found a surprising kind of freedom in refusal in the South Hebron Hills: "[...] I stand on some barren hill or in a field, the officer tells me to leave, threatens me with harsh punishment. This happens all the time. This 'no' instantly comes to define my sense of freedom [...]" (Shulman 2018, 64–65)

Similarly, Ilana Hammerman, a staunch and dedicated anti-occupation activist of many years as well as a highly regarded writer, translator, editor, and public intellectual, attests to finding freedom in the capacity to say 'no.' Her memoir uses the anti-occupation lexicon of contention described earlier to express her outrage at the unrelenting oppressiveness of the occupation regime, including the maddening bureaucratic machinations devised against the Palestinian population that she comes across during her activist forays into the occupied territories (Hammerman 2016).

Hammerman is aware of the severely limited effect of her attempt to offer solidarity and practical assistance to the beleaguered Palestinians, who are

8 Since the events of October 7, 2003, Holocaust language and imagery have been frequently invoked in Israeli public discourse with reference to the Hamas brutal attacks on Israeli civilians, which invoked the cultural memory of Jewish victimhood. At the same time, the Israeli relentless war of retaliation on Gaza has positioned Israel in the perpetrator role, triggering Holocaust-related accusations of Nazi-like genocidal practices in the international scene.

crushed by Israel's control over their lives. Like David Shulman, she celebrates the sense of freedom that comes with saying 'no' to the regulations of the Israeli authorities, describing how it allows her to open up and say 'yes' to the human encounters occasioned by her forays into the West Bank towns and villages. In her memoir, as in her op-ed essays in the press, she berates members of the Zionist left for their "armchair allyship," for failing to act on their liberal beliefs and reach out to the Palestinians in defiance of official regulations. In her words: "The greatest 'yes' of all is to say yes to personal and civil disobedience" (Hammerman 2016, 298).

Notably, even though Hammerman occasionally mentions her participation in various organised resistance events by radical activist groups of the kind recounted in Shulman's memoir, the story of her grassroots activism is constructed as an individual feat of border-crossing solidarity (as hinted by the book's original Hebrew title, which reads *A Woman on Her Own*). In fact, her memoir can be seen as an extension of her earlier solitary forays into the backyard of Israeli society, notably her exploration of the life world of women who are sex workers (Hammerman 2004), an emerging literary genre that has been analysed under the heading of "documentary literature" (Turetzky 2017).

There are similarities between the literature documenting journeys taken by their authors in the Israeli backyard, ethnographic reports of fieldwork in the margins of Israeli society, and memoirs that relate to under-the-radar activism that finds its place off the beaten path. There are also resonances between the dilemmas of self-positioning and self-writing addressed by the authors of these increasingly blurred genres of documentary writing. To what extent are they able to refrain from imposing their preconceived frame of reference on the 'otherness' of the social reality they seek to describe and interpret? While ethnographies, which are not auto-ethnographies, purport to reconstruct the lifeworld of the cultural other, and documentary literature is designed to familiarise readers with the less visible corners of the society they live in, memoirs, even those of activists engaged in a collective pursuit, prioritise their author-protagonist's personal voice. Each of the memoirists discussed here adds his or her personal note to the larger story of what it means and how it feels to claim a dissident position vis-à-vis one's culture of belonging through the unconstrained use of a lexicon of contention, such as 'occupation'-related terms, in challenging its central components of hegemonic collective memory, such as the Holocaust.

In sum, for Israeli anti-occupation activists, embarking on the path of resistance is a significant step in a long journey of assuming an 'ally' identity. They do so both by engaging in oppositional action and by testifying to their activist engagements. This discourse-centred activism is mainly enacted through

communicative vigilance in the form of lexical choices, including the re-configuration of Holocaust language in Israeli collective identity, positioning Israeli activists as 'allies' in the Palestinian struggle against the occupation.

5 Concluding Remarks

Though largely restricted to the echo chambers of radical left activism, anti-occupation activist memoirs exercise a measure of mnemonic control in the context of social silencing. They do so through lexically-grounded communicative vigilance, and by cultivating a measure of expressive stability for dissident voices in a hostile and rapidly changing media ecology. They provide a discursive site in which the lexicon of contention is dominant. I have proposed the pragmatic notion of 'contentious edge' by way of capturing the dynamics of resistance enacted through lexical and thematic choices that constitute the protest lexicon of a given dissenting group. This notion points to the work that contentious language can do in the struggle over public agendas, the positioning of social players, and the reinvigoration of controversy in contexts in which its absence testifies to suppression, silencing, and erasure rather than social consensus.

Activist memoirs play an important role in the struggle over the historical and cultural record. Indeed, they perform all three dimensions of memory work identified by Ann Rigney (2018) in the memory-activism nexus. They are cultural platforms in which memories *of* activism are constructed and reconstructed. They make use of historical analogies to enact memory *in* activism, whether by providing precedents and models of past resistance (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent struggle, *satyagraha*) or by invoking the collective memory of a particular collective past (e.g., the Holocaust, its victims and perpetrators). Memoirs as a genre of resistance literature can also be seen as a form of *memory activism* (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023), i.e. as interventions designed to shape the ways activist struggles will be inscribed in future memory.

The anti-occupation memoirs I have studied address fundamental tensions associated with their activist engagements. Their self-distancing from hegemonic ideologies and official policies is coupled with a deep personal investment in the Israeli state as a source of identification and belonging. This tension is reflected in their use of words that carry a contentious edge. These words are at once legible yet objectionable within Israeli mainstream discourse, positioning their users as dissenting members of the society they belong to.

Furthermore, memoirists are highly self-reflexive about their activist engagements. While their detailed accounts of grassroots involvement in

border-crossing solidarity activism underscore the central activist values of persistence and tenacity, they also reveal misgivings about the ultimate value and meaning of their activist pursuits, a tension captured in the oxymoron employed in the title of David Shulman's first memoir *Dark Hope* (2007). Yehudit Kirstein Keshet extends this mixture of hope and scepticism to the act of memoir-writing itself, which she considers as part of the struggle over future memory. At the end of her memoir, which highlights Israeli women's monitoring of soldiers' conduct at military checkpoints, she takes this scepticism a step further. Going beyond the frustration associated with the sense of futility that often attaches to protracted activist engagements, she raises the unresolved, tension-filled possibility of co-optation, saying:

Yet the question remains: whose voice will dominate? Will the memories of protest focus on the Occupation and its evils [...] or will the protest become part of collective self-congratulation, yet another proof of our, Israel's, moral superiority as though to say that although there is no partner for peace, despite the terrorist attacks, merciful mothers went to succour the 'enemy.' And perhaps that, too, is part of the truth. (Kirstein Keshet 2006, 155)

This question brings forth the complexity of the 'ally' position claimed by anti-occupation activists, pointing to the irony encapsulated in the possibility that they will be used as 'fig leaves' by the repressive regime they seek to dismantle. Yet it also raises the possibility of a more ambiguous positioning, one that does not reduce political players into an oppressor/oppressed binary that distinguishes good from evil. By providing a public platform for such questions in the field of grassroots activism, activist memoirs open a space for self-doubts and tentativeness amidst the din of protest slogans and calls to action. Exercising communicative vigilance over the use and non-use of words as well as over the invocation of cultural memory, the anti-occupation memoirs construct dissident voices that offer reflections on the meanings, possibilities, and limitations of their grassroots engagements, including their tenuous position as 'allies.' In so doing, they enrich the cultural conversation on activism in new ways.

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The Blessing of Tainted Memories: Witnessing to Sexual Trauma, Language Ideology, and Activism among Pious Jews

Michal Kravel-Tovi

1 My Story

Sara called me up. She had never done so before now; it was always me who reached out to her. What was it that was so important for her to tell me? She went straight to the point: she wanted me to accompany her the following week, to a “safeguarding event,” as she called it—meaning a lecture she would be giving about sexual abuse. She explained that she had been approached by a group of young mothers from the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) town of Bnei Barak on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Once a month they meet to discuss a topic of the host’s choosing. “This time they chose safeguarding; they want to hear my story,” Sara added pleased. Before I could check my calendar, she quickly offered an alternative—to accompany her the next evening to *another* safeguarding event that she had been invited to, this time closer to my home. “You won’t believe it,” she told me, “I posted on Facebook just yesterday that I am open to invitations to give talks about safeguarding and tell my story, and I am already fully booked for the next couple of weeks.”

The following week, I heard *her story*—or, to be more precise, I heard and watched her tell her personal story as a victim of sexual abuse to a group of about twenty Haredi women, before moving on to highlighting warning signs and rules of thumb concerning children’s safety in the Haredi community. Listening to Sara recount her story, the audience seemed mesmerised and shaken. Several wiped away tears, many sighed frequently; some in turn spoke about the weighty influence of her account on their soul, either because it triggered their own memories of abuse or because it crystallised their utmost fears for their children.

For me, it was not the first nor would it be the last time that I would hear *her story*. I had first met Sara two and a half years earlier, in early 2017. She was already a high-profile activist in the Haredi community’s emerging anti-sexual violence campaign. Possibly too decentralized to be formally labelled a ‘social



FIGURE 2.1 Sara telling *her story* to a group of friends and acquaintances (August 2019, Bnei Brak)

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

movement,' this evolved campaign, which has gradually manifested over the last decade or so, is made up of a myriad of initiatives, organisations, publications, and digital platforms. It is grounded in a heterogeneous network of ultra-Orthodox individuals and groups—survivors of sexual violence, professionals, community rabbis and religious functionaries, grassroots groups, and civil society organisations. Some work to mobilise rabbis and powerful communal authorities, others to expose scandals; others still direct their efforts toward public education campaigns, or to configuring a support infrastructure for affected individuals and their families (Krael-Tovi 2020).

Sara is a regular presence in the general Israeli press and on social media, usually in the capacity of a critical observer, commenting on and giving context to the ills of her own community. I became attuned to Sara's public appearances early on in my ethnographic study of anti-sexual violence activism in ultra-Orthodox communities. She is the type of person who is impossible to overlook. Together with a couple of friends, who were young Haredi adults like herself, she set up a Facebook page in the autumn of 2015 called *Lo Tishtok* (Hebrew: literally, "Thou Shalt Not Be Silenced")—a linguistic construct clearly intended to resonate with the Ten Commandments, framing the idea of a 'breaking of silence' around sexual abuse as the ultimate eleventh commandment, a moral imperative of prime importance.

I first met Sara in person on a sunny winter morning in early 2017 in a coffee house off the twisting highway that leads to Jerusalem. She was as animated and candid as I had expected. As stories of the cases that she had been handling poured out of her, her phone rang and buzzed incessantly. She commented on

how challenging it was for her, practically and emotionally, to handle it all: knowing that on the other side of a call, there was often a person or family in urgent need, who may have kept silent for a long time. Now, she had an invaluable window to try and help out.

But as much as she talked about others, it was clear that she was also keen to tell me her own story. When I switched on the recorder and asked her to tell me the story of how she became an activist, she clarified: “but, first, I will tell you my own story.” Articulate, direct, even crude sometimes, she left out no details. She talked at length about her memories of the actual offense, when she was nine years old, the immediate disclosure to her mother, the inevitable mismanagement of her situation by both her mother and the communal rabbi, the years-long repression of the trauma, and the reminiscence and realisation of the trauma as an adolescent, followed by the eruption of prolonged and cyclic episodes of PTSD. She seemed to know the story by heart. She was clearly adept at narrating her story and she owned it. Indeed, getting to know her better over time, I have watched her telling her story to multiple audiences, practicing and cultivating her skills as a narrator. In all these instances, the story of her victimhood blended organically with the story of her becoming an activist, the first component feeding the stakes and urgencies of the latter.

One can interpret Sara’s emphasis on *her story* as an illustrative instance of a pervasive confessional culture and the flourishing of intimate publics (Berlant 2008). One can also stress how the survivor’s identity is often valorised through therapeutic enactments of trauma stories (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991) and through the witnessing of a hitherto silenced suffering (see also McKinney 2007). These explanations are valid, but they do not capture Sara’s deliberate usage of *her story* as a tool of activism; as a means to raise awareness, mobilise publics, and dismantle taboos. Ultimately, Sara enacts *her story* in order to model and push towards social change in Haredi communities, and how they handle and speak about the otherwise unspeakable malaise of sexual abuse. Sara foregrounds *her story*, her memories and words, as a speech act, as a mode of activism.

In this regard, Sara is far from being alone or unusual amidst her fellow activists. In fact, a fair number of them grew into activism out of their own life histories as victims-cum-survivors of sexual abuse and chose to go public with *their stories*. Additionally, it is quite common for them to organise and facilitate public events during which other victims speak up about their abuse. They tell ‘their stories’ in living rooms, rehabilitation centres, and conference halls; broadcast them on YouTube, in interviews on TV and in documentaries; and share textual testimonies on social media. They tell ‘their stories’ to neighbours, community members, total strangers, and to imagined virtual audiences.

They use words to spread the memories of their utmost private, embodied, and affective experiences. In doing so, they trust in the social power of words to shake and improve the world that enabled the abuse and the silence in the first place. Across my six-year-long (and still ongoing) fieldwork, I have attended dozens of events that included or were fully focused on personal witnessing.

This chapter takes seriously the intersections between personal memory, language, and protest as an analytic framework for explicating the role played by trauma testimonies in grassroots protests against sexual violence and its silencing. This is a productive intersection for exploring how and why Haredi activists utilise and advance the witnessing of personal trauma (whether theirs or others) as a potent linguistic tool in their battle for justice, accountability, and safer communities. I pay attention to how personal memory becomes conducive to carrying the promise of critique and protest. As Haredi victims narrate in public, semi-public, and digital spheres, their generally muted memories of victimhood introduce new and subversive words and modes of speaking in and about the Haredi world. These, in turn, advance sought-after social change. This is why the tainted memories contain a blessing, as indicated in the title.

I argue that within the specific cultural context of Haredi Jews, witnessing is a particularly daring and potent mechanism of protest, because it is at odds with conventional Haredi language ideologies. First, because witnessing's very *raison d'être* is to break expected boundaries of speaking: to speak in public about personal issues and to speak about sectorial Haredi problems in settings and on platforms that invite or allow outsiders to become listeners. Witnessing thus violates basic rules regarding where one is permitted to speak and what one can talk about. Second, the testimonies inevitably (and sometimes intentionally) provide critical portrayals of communal failures. Consequently, such portrayals are not trivial. In the virtuous society that the Haredi Jews consider themselves to constitute, critique is generally banned and understood as a disrespectful mode of speaking. Accumulatively, these portrayals illuminate dysfunctional communal realities in need of change as well as less-than-perfect rabbinic figures. While these first-person accounts refer to specific and unique circumstances, they expose broader Haredi communal constellations and norms, which shape particular contexts of abuse and silencing.

To explicate the analytic stakes of my account, I conduct below a survey of the literature on witnessing and make the case for treating language ideology as a valuable component within it. Then, to contextualise Haredi witnessing, I demonstrate how the Haredi battle against sexual violence operates to a great extent as discourse-based activism, one which equates speaking with doing. Together, these sections will set the stage for an analysis of how putting painful

memories on display can help create a non-trivial critical ambience and build a community of dissident speakers.

2 Witnessing through the Prism of Language Ideology

Much has been written about testimony/witnessing in its broadest sense and its multiple manifestations in various public and institutional spaces (Chua and Grinberg 2021; Das 2003; Feldman 2004; Grinberg 2021; Jones and Woods 2003). Scholars attend to the cultural currency of witnessing as a form of memory work; more specifically, as a practice that transforms a personal memory, usually one related to trauma, into a publicly mediated story (Antze and Lambek 1996). Testimony thus epitomises the link between memories and words. Yet this link is far from straightforward; not only is memory—and all the more so the memory of trauma—essentially incomplete and contingent but trauma itself is often unspeakable and un-shareable. As Dan Stone (2014) argues, in the case of testimonies, speaking is both necessary and unbearable.

Witnessing can manifest itself as a factual description, in the first person, of key events or of an “existential or embodied truth” (Krämer and Weigel 2017, x11) of an event. Alternatively, it can reveal the traces that the violence has imprinted onto the psyche. Either way, witnessing is never one’s personal trauma alone. It is a personal traumatic memory packaged as a deliverable narrative, usually elevated to the status of a heroic (speech) act, which can then be transformed into a widely distributed expressive voice. Individual testimonies can be public, political, and historical in import all at once. Relatedly, witnessing is often associated with a moral call to speak truth to power, to be willing to build on personal remembering in order to engage in tough but necessary conversations, to recognise evil, and to pursue justice. Witnessing can thus be an act or even a ritualised performance of defiance, and as such is often understood as both challenging and redemptive, to individuals as well as to publics, to speakers and listeners alike (Katriel 2021).

Ian Hacking’s (1995) assertion that memory should be thought of as a narrative, helps establish the moral economy of testimony as an effective, and often affective, technique of discourse-centred activism. To give another perspective on the impact of witnessing within the context of activism, Naisargi Dave argues that moments of witnessing foster transformative moral responsibility which helps render individuals into activists. She writes: “Consider witness not as the thing one does but as the imperative” (Dave 2014, 440). Across various contexts of activism, testimonies provide both speakers and audiences with an interactive space to bear witness to traumatic pasts, to tell untold stories,

to insist on their historical truth and collective import, and ultimately catalyze action. As numerous scholars have written, in the contemporary era of virtual reality and social media activism, the interactive production of witnesses is further dispersed, multiplied, and remediated on exponential scales (Chua and Grinberg 2021; Gray 2016), which has resulted in the engagement and mobilisation of numerous audiences, both real and imagined, who are invited to know, to care, and possibly to act.

These dynamics have been clearly at play in other contexts of anti-sexual violence activism, including the recent “Me-Too” movement. Since the 1970s, the imperative to witness, speak up, and speak out has been a central feature, strategised as a communicative grassroots vehicle to expose the public not only to the torments of sexual trauma but more widely to the structural, institutional forces of sexism and misogyny (Alcoff 2021; Serisier 2021). As Linda Martin Alcoff writes: “It is the voices of victims that need to remain at the centre of the fight for cultural change. It is their/our knowledge that is at stake when the problem is shrugged away, but this knowledge must be heeded to enlarge, enrich, and also complicate our understanding of the problem” (Alcoff 2021, 24).

Building on this rich scholarship on witnessing, I emphasise the importance of paying more sustained attention to the role of language ideology within this nexus of memory, words, and activism. Principally, language ideologies mediate between social order and ways of talking (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). They consist of the attitudes and emotions that people have towards language, specific forms of speaking, and categories of speakers. They help speakers and listeners conceptualise language and its appropriate usage in daily social and political worlds (e.g., Carr 2010; Frekko et al. 2015; Silverstein 1979); guiding them in deciding who can speak with whom, for what goal, in what context, by which vocabulary. Expressed either tacitly, in the actual enactment of language, or through meta-discursive formulations such as proverbs and guidelines, language ideologies constitute a commonsensical set of perceptions, proclamations, and appraisals about the work that language could and should do in social life. Speakers from particular speech communities draw on this set of rules to discern between proper and improper usage of language and to delineate the boundaries of the permissible (Kroskrity 2004).

Just as witnessing occurs within specific structural conditions, cognitive constraints, and institutional norms (Feldman 2004), it also occurs within certain linguistic conditions, assumptions, and properties—namely, within certain language ideologies. By looking at witnessing through the prism of language ideology, we can better scrutinise the linguistic forces that undergird it as well as the particular cultural meanings assigned to it as a speech

act geared towards protest and activism. The specific formulas that render memories into spoken words, the particular contents raised by speaking, and the publics taken as legitimate audiences of witnessing—all these aspects are either informed by or go against language ideologies. In fact, even the seemingly trivial designation of witnessing as a speech act—the very idea that by talking, one is doing something and, by extension, is engaging in activism—is informed by a certain language ideology. As the ethnographer of communication Tamar Katriel argues in her compelling work on defiant discourse among anti-occupation veterans of the Israeli military, the very construction of activism around discursive practices is the result of a language ideology that conflates speaking and doing and is rooted in the understanding that speaking is an effective mode of activist involvement (Katriel 2021). In the following section, I demonstrate how the battle against sexual violence in the Haredi community is grounded in investments in discourse of many kinds. Discourse-based activism, within which the witnessing of victimhood is entrenched, is the salient mode of operation.

3 Speaking of Sexual Violence: Discourse-Based Activism

Speaking is central to what this emerging Haredi network does and aspires to achieve. Ultimately, participants are all speakers, potential speakers, listeners, and brokers of anti-sexual violence discourses, as they play a part in different speech events, including confessional and witnessing lectures, educational talks, media interviews, and documentaries. The strategic circulation of all these speech events through social media amplifies their effect across large audiences.

Obviously, speaking, in all its iterations, is not the only thing that takes place. Fundraising, sharing resources, setting up infrastructure, developing programs and services—these are all part of what is being accomplished. But the kind of goal that speaking is assumed to achieve—circulating information, raising awareness, and normalizing speaking—remains central to all these efforts.

Speaking is taken as a means, a measure, and a marker of social change all at once. It is a statement in and of itself (see also, Kravel-Tovi 2024). When my interlocutors discussed their sense of accomplishment, they noted gratefully the growing numbers who were “coming to talk and to listen,” and the higher frequency of awareness events and safeguarding training. One told me that five or ten years earlier, one would not have seen an event of such scope. During such events, panelists were often congratulated for being courageous enough to talk in public while audiences were presented as eager to talk. When *Retorno*, an Orthodox



FIGURE 2.2 A crowd of Haredi women listens to a lecture on sexual trauma (June 2017, Beit-Shemesh, Israel)
PHOTO TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 2.3 A placard on a lecture series on generally taboo issues in Haredi education, titled “Talking About It.” (June 2019, Beit Shemesh, Israel)
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

rehabilitation centre, launched a series of lectures about stigmatised issues in the community (including sexual violence and addiction to pornography), it was under the title *Medabrim al Ze* (Hebrew for “Talking about it”).

I noticed how audiences themselves were given the responsibility to further the conversation, “to spread the word” and “to keep this conversation going.” Parents and professionals in different capacities were taught how to speak with their children, pupils, and clients. As one activist told a group of young Haredi mothers keen to learn the practical tools of children safeguarding: “The only thing that can be done to advance [sexual] safeguarding is simply to talk about it.” Bride and groom teachers (who prepare women and men for their sexual responsibilities in their forthcoming marital life), matchmakers, and ritual bath attendants—all professionals encountering individuals in intimate moments related to sexuality—have learned how to sensitively elicit conversation about sexual violence and to keep the door open for further conversations. As a Crisis Center professional explained to bride teachers during a series of classes about sexual violence: “I do not impose a talk on the matter ... I put it on the table. It is an invitation (to talk).” Likewise, key community members were taught how to become attuned to ‘suspicious silences’ around them (i.e., people who seem to be hurting but who do not reach out for support), and to make themselves approachable with regard to these matters. In various conferences targeted at specific audiences, which range from male preschool educators to the wives of leading rabbis, calls to “make yourself *shail*” (lit. an address for questions) were raised again and again. On other occasions, survivors themselves narrated personal testimonies, describing in vivid detail the horrors of their abuse and the ongoing muted experience of victimhood (see also Alcoff 2021).

In these many speech events, interlocutors often consider speaking as a way to redemption. For example, the term ‘silence’ is often invoked to indicate cover-up and concealment by a hypocritical, cynical, and corrupted leadership (see also Fader 2020, 37; Leshner 2014). It is associated with knowing much and doing nothing (Herzog and Lahad 2006) as well as with a mode of communication rooted in the spheres of secrecy and lies. Some interlocutors note the etymological link in Hebrew between muteness and violence (*elem* and *alimut*, nouns derived from the same semantic root), while others use the medicalised language of silenced bodies and silenced sexualities to describe the adverse repercussions of sexual violence. Therapists emphasise the psychological damage of silence and the toll it takes on religious survivors whose inner communication with their God can become impaired (see also Orsi 2016; Rosmarin et al. 2018). Within this framework of redemption, speaking about sexual violence

is far from a neutral act. Hence, it is often elevated to *speaking up* (*le'hitbate, le'ashmia kol*), valorised as *daring to speak* (*le'ha'ez le'daber*), dramatised as *exposing and not-covering* (*lachsaf, lo le'taye'ach*), and, ultimately, morally celebrated as *breaking the silence* (*lo lishtok*). Altogether, activists and professionals thus convey trust in the power of speaking as a way towards social change.

This trust in words as catalysts of social change has been particularly manifest when victims-cum-survivors-cum-witnesses tell their stories. In the next two sections, I describe in detail two powerful stories: the first was delivered to a large Los Angeles ultra-Orthodox audience and recorded for the YouTube channel of an advocacy and victims' support organisation (Jewish Community Watch [JCW], based primarily in the USA). The second story was woven into a documentary movie about a protagonist who is a high-profile survivor and activist, who had also told his story at numerous public events as well as in a published memoir. Both stories have circulated widely and garnered notable public attention within and outside of the Haredi community. While these stories do not capture the full gamut of Haredi witnessing, they provide an insightful glimpse into the workings of witnessing as a personal, bare, and highly effective speech act that goes against the grain of pervasive Haredi language ideologies. In these sections, I provide lengthy excerpts intentionally to demonstrate how witnessing challenges conventional Haredi language ideologies, thus working as an activist vehicle for social change.

4 Sima's Testimony

Entitled "A Frum [pious] Survivor Tells Her Story Publicly," the video (from 2015) features Sima, a Haredi woman in her thirties, who shares the story of her prolonged abuse, as a teenager, by a charismatic rabbi in her community in Santa Monica, California. For more than 30 minutes, Sima describes, in an evocative and sometimes wavering voice, 'her story.' The audience applauds repeatedly, especially when she interlaces her story with critical statements regarding the failing of communal and rabbinic authorities and with reflections on her moral duty to witness in support of activism and an urgent call for social change.

She started her talk by saying, "The manner in which my story of sexual abuse was dealt with is unacceptable," while an accompanying caption read: "Every survivor has a story. Most are untold. On Sunday, in front of a large Los Angeles audience, Sima Yarmush publicly told her story. For the very first time." After that, she went on:



A Frum Survivor Tells Her Story Publicly - For the First Time



Jewish Community Watch
3.96K subscribers

SUBSCRIBED



FIGURE 2.4 Sima speaking to an audience in LA
A SCREENSHOT FROM THE YOUTUBE BROADCAST ON THE JEWISH
COMMUNITY WATCH CHANNEL

We cannot ignore sexual abuse within our communities. Young people who cry out and reach for help need to be helped. When I finally reached out nine-and-a-half years ago, I was not helped [...] My grandmother, who is a survivor of Auschwitz, knows that I'm speaking here tonight and she is extremely proud of me [applause]. She is proud of me because she knows I have come here today to speak the truth. And as a survivor of the Holocaust, she knows how important the truth is. [...]

When I was 14 years old: young, naïve, innocent, and completely clueless about anything related to sexuality, a very sick married man made his way into my life and destroyed every pure and innocent cell in my body. He destroyed it by intimidation, coercion, secrecy, and threats [...] I began to experience severe panic and anxiety attacks. I went to therapists, none were able to pin down why I was suffering so much and I was surely not disclosing anything about the abuse. [...]

[At the age of eighteen] I garnered any courage I could find to call my parents into a room and tell them the most devastating news of their life [...] But aside from the pain of my parents, we as a family, as a shul, as a community, had a huge problem: we had a charismatic rabbi whom

I revealed to be a serious danger. My parents really didn't know what to do, how to tell the community without risking my anonymity which was really important back then [...] we went to meet a social worker from the Jewish services. I told her everything and she told us she will make sure to get rabbis from the halakhic [i.e., pertaining to Jewish law] advisory board involved. Four LA rabbis were assigned to my case [Sima says the names of four known rabbis]. [...] Let me just pause here for a moment. You may be wondering why didn't I go to the police to press charges. Well [...] I was 18, unmarried, and terrified that the public will know that I went through sexual abuse; clearly I have come a long way [since then] [the audience applauds] [...] I thought that these prestigious rabbis would help me notify the public about this dangerous man. Right? Wrong!

The hearing with the rabbis was very emotional for me. It was the first time I talked openly about the sexual abuse that I endured [...] Finally, one of the rabbis raised his voice [and] asked me, 'What is the name of the man who did this to you?' I was waiting for this moment for so long! As I was opening up my mouth to say the name of the man who sexually abused me for a two and a bit years, one of the other rabbis interjects and says, 'let's hold off of saying the names of who it was, for now.' I was instantly infuriated. What, I thought, did I just hear what I think I just heard? I turned to [the social worker] and said 'I am saying the name' [...] I did not know who had more chutzpah this dark evening; was it me who did not listen to an esteemed rabbi or was it the rabbi who asked me to remain silent. I don't know from where I had the courage. I was [in] such a broken and vulnerable state, but I am so happy I did not let a rabbi to shun me into a silence [applause, people stand up]. The rabbis then told me that everything will be taken care of and that we should leave all matters of my abuse to them [...] To make a very long story short, my family got no backing or support from the rabbis to show our community that the allegations were true. I was not offered any help or support. [...]

At one point after the meeting, my parents had a meeting with another rabbi. He told my parents that they had absolutely no moral, legal, ethical, or halakhic reason to say anything about the abuse to anybody. Let me repeat that: an esteemed rabbi said to my parents [counting on her fingers as she speaks] that they have no moral, legal, ethical, [or] halakhic reason to tell anyone about the abuse. What I later learned is that my abuser was sent to therapy by the rabbis and that there was one rabbi taking him under his wing to guide him. The community he had moved to was not informed and had no idea about any of this. [...]

To all the rabbis who protect abusers, including the rabbis in my halakhic advisory board: shame on you! [applause] Shame on you for not speaking up, shame on you for failing our communities, shame on you for putting our communities in grave danger. Shame on you for being complicit. [...]

Since the day Meyer [then the CEO of JCW] told me about the event, my soul didn't stop, it told me: Sima, you've got to go; Sima, this will save so many people; Sima, you cannot enable more abuse to go on. And here I am [applause, the audience rises up] [...] And now that I've done my part, I turn to you and I ask you, every single one of you, sitting here: What are you going to do to protect our children? Because we have every (counting on her fingers) moral, legal, ethical, and halakhic obligation to do everything we can. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wffN3mYWCCw>)

5 Manny's Testimony

Released in 2014, *Code of Silence* is an Australian film documenting the struggles of Manny Waks and his Hasidic family in the aftershock of Waks' public disclosure of the sexual abuse he had endured during his school years in an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva (Manny was molested by the yeshiva's security person, who was also the karate teacher). Three years later, Manny published his memoir, *Who Gave You Permission? The Memoir of a Child Sexual Abuse Survivor Who Fought Back* (2017). In the documentary, which is narrated at intervals by a powerful voice-over, we hear Manny and his parents reflect on the high price they all paid for coming forward, seeking justice, and confronting the communal authorities. This is a story of increasing disenchantment with the community; a process that pushed Manny's parents to immigrate from Australia to Israel and resulted in Manny leaving the religious fold altogether. Manny's father uses harsh words to describe his estrangement from the community, calling his relationship with it poisoned and arguing that his son's experience opened a Pandora's box of scandals.

Manny: "I was molested numerous times in the mikveh [the ritual bath] beginning at age eleven. You are naked [...] he was playing with my penis by holding his hand around it and rubbing it, rubbing his hand up and down it. He did what he did in such a holy place. I blanked out" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6A2OSIUBY>). Manny describes how, in the wake of the abuse he experienced, he started to act out by violating the religious rules of the Sabbath, hanging out with girls, listening to non-Jewish music, eating



FIGURE 2.5 Manny and his parents
PUBLIC DOMAIN

non-kosher food, and refraining from speaking to his parents for extended periods. A media campaign on Australian TV, which encouraged victims to report sexual abuse, became the catalyst for a massive change within Manny's family.

Manny's father: "I was sitting in my office and he was in his room upstairs. He came down to me and told me what had happened. Not many details, just that something happened to him. He wanted to report it [...] I felt really, really bad about it, I felt [that I had] let him down, feeling very helpless [...]" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6A2OSIUBY>).

Manny and his parents explain how they tried and failed to mobilise communal authorities to take action and discuss in detail the saga around reporting the abuse to the police—an act that violates the Haredi principle of handling controversial or difficult matters privately.

Manny:

I was very happy that I mustered the courage to go and confront him about it. Rabbi G told me: we are redressing it [...] please just keep things quiet. And I said to him: Rabbi Groner, can you assure me that he is not reoffending, and he said to me: no I can't [...] the police investigated the perpetrator, who denied all allegations. Eventually, it was his word against mine. The case went cold. [...] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6A2OSIUBY>)

Manny: "I did everything I could to pursue justice privately. I went to the police, I went to Rabbi G on several occasions and I got nowhere. What else should

I have done? I felt that if I [went] public with my story, this will be a game changer” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6A2OSIUBY>). His mother objected to Manny going public; she was the head of a communal women’s organisation in Melbourne and feared that the family would be ostracised. Indeed, a brutal backlash was not long in coming, both via social media and in everyday life. Manny’s father was not allowed to join a quorum in the synagogue and was socially ostracised, Manny’s siblings’ prospects in the Orthodox matchmaking ‘market’ were harmed, and the yeshiva accused Manny himself of running an anti-religious campaign.

Recounting the story of becoming an activist, Manny asserts: “It wasn’t a Manny Waks thing but a Jewish community issue, and it needed to address [it] as such” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6A2OSIUBY>). Filmed outside the court where his predator was tried before eventually pleading guilty, Manny makes an emotional statement about leaders in power and the importance of holding them accountable in order to make the community a safe and better place for families and children.

6 Discussion: Dissenting Memories, Dissenting Voices

Sima, Manny, and Manny’s parents establish a narrative authority to flag sexual violence as a social problem that warrants words and actions – and words as actions. Sima and Manny gain authority through their truth-telling; the first-person narration of the accounts foregrounds the embodied perspective of those who know, first-hand, what it feels like to be in the inferno of sexual abuse. Sima’s references to her grandmother—an Auschwitz survivor—further reinforce the imperative of witnessing as bold and necessary truth-telling. Like the memories of other victims/survivors, Sima and Manny’s memories are personal: they are theirs alone. And yet, they draw on their memories to tell a story bigger in effect and importance than their own in order to advocate for corrective actions that transcend their individual call for justice. Using the first person singular, they make moral claims in the name of the first-person plural: we, the community; we, Haredi Jews. Over time, these stories accumulate and form a powerful collective voice.

First, the acts of witnessing turn audiences (i.e., real and digital) into active listeners. Audiences become partners who have a role to play in spreading the memories and stories of others that they have now become aware of. They are now tasked to further deliver a clear message in the name of a moral common good, a moral common cause. Subsequently, these witnessing voices coalesce into a greater collective voice because Sima and Manny’s memories

expose shared experiences of the dysfunctional arrangements and realities of Haredi communal life. These memories are underpinned by familiarity. Hence, they resonate with the memories of others that may (and hopefully do) not include sexual trauma but are certainly steeped in the insiders' knowledge of the communal system and its mechanisms. These memories-cum-stories of witnessing feed a broader critique of these mechanisms. Sima and Manny's witnessing, along with many others that I heard throughout my fieldwork thus conclude in one voice: no more.

When considered together, these public witnesses defy the forms and norms of Haredi speaking. These speech acts present a double defiance against prevalent language ideologies: they deliberately intend to speak publicly about sexual violence, thus allowing a subject that is usually constrained to private and highly regulated spheres to make its way unorthodoxly into the public sphere. In addition, they articulate an otherwise impermissible critique of the social organisation of Haredi life, thereby going against the tendency to portray Haredi life as faultless.

On the whole, Haredi language ideologies dictate a restrictive ethics and politics of speech. Haredi Jews are regimented to 'speak nicely,' in order to cultivate pious souls and maintain a distinct way of life. 'Speaking nicely' includes cultivating one's way of speaking, adopting a refined manner of speech, and sanctioning "bad language" or "ugly words" (Fader 2009, 162–164). Speaking about offenders and publicising the names of predators is commonly perceived as going against the religious injunction against gossip and defamation. This prohibition is connected to the ban against *Lashon Hara* (a term from Jewish legal jurisprudence, referring to derogatory speech about another person). Hence, speaking badly about fellow Jews—even if warranted—is considered a 'non-Haredi' or 'non-Jewish' act. This set of prohibitions, at the same time, conforms to highly gendered and age-related social hierarchies. Talking negatively about teachers, rabbis, parents, and communal authorities (even if they are complicit in scandals and cover-ups) is taken as a marker of inappropriate Haredi manners.

The totalised nature of Haredi life incentivises victims to remain silent. Tellingly, over the course of my fieldwork, several of my interlocutors used the rhetorical phrase "what would people say," when talking about the anxieties evoked by the spectre of the relentless communal gaze or communal tongue. Knowing all too well the repercussions of stigma and shame, Haredim generally refrain from publicly disclosing personal and family issues—a sibling with special needs, psychological disability, people who have left the community, or a family history of trauma, for example. Haredim know that such exposure will leave the speaker and their entire family marked and ostracised. They may

be excluded from prestigious yeshivas and seminaries and their prospects for suitable marriage matches with spouses from 'good families' will be harmed, quite possibly irrevocably. Because matchmaking and educational institutions are salient mechanisms of social capital and community control, the consequences of such public exposure can be very harmful. Given this high toll, one can understand why Sima was extra vigilant in maintaining her anonymity and why Manny's family suffered from the backlash against him coming forward.

Haredi Jews define the world around them in binary terms of inside and outside: Jew versus Gentile, Haredi versus secular, good and spiritual versus beastly and crude (Fader 2009; Tavory 2016). This demarcation has consequences regarding whom, and about what, Haredi Jews are permitted or forbidden to speak. *Mesirah* (literally 'transmission') is a Jewish jurisprudential principle illustrating this set of distinctions. Consolidated across a tense history of living as an oppressed minority 'among the nations,' *Mesirah* prohibits a Jew from reporting the conduct of another Jew to a non-communal (generally non-Jewish) authority. A Jew who breaks this principle is labeled with the disparaging moniker of a *moiser*, an informant-cum-traitor. This is precisely why Sima was reluctant to report her abuse to the police and instead submitted herself to the authority of a rabbinic advisory board. This is also the reason why Manny's family was pushed out of the community.

In addition, given the moral boundaries that ultra-Orthodox communities reinforce vis-à-vis the secular and non-Jewish societies that they live in, the exposure of social problems and deviance in the community is perceived as a stain on the entire group. Hence, the communal injunction to *not* report sexual violence to state agencies is associated with the broadened command 'not to wash one's dirty laundry' outside the community. Haredi communities are far from unique in exercising powerful mechanisms against "washing dirty laundry" before the scrutiny of external forces (Zerubavel 2006, 27, 77).

Moreover, across the groups that constitute the broad spectrum of Haredim in Israel, talk about sexuality and the body is strictly monitored by gendered prohibitions concerning modesty. Any topic related to sexuality—from the normal psychosexual development of teenagers to sexual violence itself—is considered immodest and thus off-limits within public spaces. They are commonly referred to as 'things that are better left unsaid,' and allowed only in the context of sexual education preparation towards marriage. Manny's direct and explicit mode of speaking about his abuse is exceptional; without using euphemisms, he pronounces, in graphic detail, private body organs and sexual acts.

Witnessing sexual violence sabotages taken-for-granted Haredi language ideologies in another important dimension: it introduces critique. The fact that Haredi society idealises itself as a virtuous society with an exemplary pious

mentality and a communal morality of good-doing, renders sexual violence simply unpalatable. It is generally dismissed as an issue that only pertains to ‘a few bad apples.’ Social problems are typically kept off the table and relegated to the realms of gossip, rumor, and denial. Pointing to them in the open could easily be considered an act of doubt and betrayal. But when tainted individual memory narratives amass, they in turn taint the idealised collective narrative of the community. These memories and disclosures illuminate adversities and evils—often extensively institutionalised and covered up by communal authorities. They are informed by the idea that speaking up can and should improve the Haredi society, precisely by critically illuminating these wrongs and mobilising the public to acknowledge them and take action. In the words of the anonymous author who published an article in the relatively liberal-oriented *Hmakom* Haredi media outlet in the wake of a huge sexual abuse scandal:

Today, so it seems, we became perfect. The Haredi society hardly engages in critical introspection. For some reason, any identification of wrongdoing is automatically taken as a challenge on our entire path; and because the path is so dear to us, any attempt at critical reflection and correction becomes illegitimate [...] aren't we paying too high a price for our refusal to admit that our way calls for some substantial changes [...] The cover-up strategy has failed, and all that is left to do is to flag from below the injustices and problems, not by brawling, or turning away from Haredi identity, but by turning inward, with love, with belief in the rightness of our cause. (Anonymous, 2021)

I do not know for sure what this Haredi author would have to say about the work that Sima and Manny's witnessing, among many others, has done for Haredi society. However, drawing from the accounts presented in this chapter, my educated guess is that he would appreciate how these acts of speech help create space for critique from within and from below, as a legitimate Haredi discourse, and even a valid course of action.

The case study at hand here calls attention to language ideologies as a key element in the workings of witnessing as a domain in which memories, words, and activism are intertwined. This insight extends beyond the specific case study under discussion. This case study, with its particular cultural and linguistic features, allows us to appreciate how language ideologies inform the shaping of speech acts as defiant discourse-based activism and play into their cultural reception. This insight pertains to other iterations of the transnational Me-Too movement as well as to other discourse-based activist settings.

It invites us to examine how language ideologies themselves may travel and spread, making their way into and intersecting with particular memory settings. By demonstrating how language ideology operates in Haredi memory, I am hoping to generate greater attention to the working of language ideology in the domains of memory and activism research. In other words, taking speaking conventions as part of cultural memory allows us to consider their role within activist toolboxes. While witnessing does not necessarily manage to challenge and change Haredi memory and language ideologies – and we will be able to assess this question only in due course – realising how it serves as a key instrument of sexual violence activism pushes us to consider shifting articulations of witnessing and their effects on memory and activist work.

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Scabs, Pickets and Camaraderie: Words and Memories of East Midlands Coal Miners

Natalie Braber

1 Introduction

In Nottinghamshire, the majority of miners did not join the nationwide UK mining strike of 1984–85. This has given rise to almost 40 years of verbal and written debate playing out especially in the media. As Hunt and McHale state, “most people would agree that the media is important in shaping people’s attitudes and beliefs, but we need to go further than that and recognise that memory and identities are also shaped by the media” (Hunt and McHale 2008: 52). The media can be a strong influence in how certain struggles are perceived, as has been demonstrated with regards to the metaphors of “war” and “enemy” within the 1984–1985 miners’ strike in the United Kingdom (Hart 2017). The language of “war” continues to affect Nottinghamshire miners and their memories to this day. On one side are the strikers, who still regard the betrayal by those who did not join the year-long action as the main reason for the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) split and subsequent terminal decline of deep coal mining in Britain. Conversely, the working miners still regard the strike as unconstitutional, with the tactical influx of flying pickets who entered the Nottinghamshire coalfield from the start of the strike. They believe that opinions were forced upon them and regard the forcing of the strike as instrumental in the union split in 1985, when some Nottinghamshire miners formed a separate organisation, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM).

For my research on “pit talk,” the distinctive language of the East Midlands miners, we interviewed former miners from around the region. These interviews were primarily about the language that the miners used in their daily work, job descriptions, practices and locations, above and below ground. Though the interviewers did not explicitly raise the subject, half of the interviewees, miners on both sides of the conflict, brought up the strike, its repercussions and the relationships between miners before, during and after the events of 1984–5. This indicates the ongoing importance of this conflict for the community.

This chapter discusses the main themes, keywords and narratives in the interviewees' discussion of the strikes. It first provides a brief background of language, memory and oral history before providing contextual information about the strike in Nottinghamshire. It then discusses the project's methodology, followed by a narrative analysis of the interviews. While it cannot review all aspects involved in the multifaceted interaction of language and memory, it touches on some key features in spoken recollections of civic contention, as well as useful research practices involved in the oral history research of gathering spoken recollections and helping communities to reconnect.

2 Memory

The act of remembering, if not the physical process, is a social construction (Gill 2012; Halbwachs 1992), as what and how something is remembered are the products of group life. As such, remembering is never just an individual but also a social activity (Berliner 2005, 200). In a culture, individuals adopt a set of beliefs (or myths, Gill 2012) based on a shared past (McDowell 2008). These beliefs form the basis of both collective and individual identities, as they are used by individuals to augment group identity and to fit their own lives into the narratives of collective memories.

Memories, which are always selective, can be affected by pressures of group identity, as well as by changing information, forgetting details and altering stories (Hunt and Robbins 1998, 59). Portelli (1992) argues that past events can be remembered in either a communal or personal mode. In the communal mode, the emphasis is on how particular times and events were experienced by the larger collective. In Halbwachs' (1992) conception, collective memory defines the relationship between the individual and society to enable a community to preserve its self-image and transfer it to younger generations over time. In this model, although there is one history, there are many collective memories. Individual recollections can change over time, for example because of social change or when perceptions of the past are altered through the media. Furthermore, Hunt states that collective memories ensure continuity, as members of the community share a sense of unity and allow them to construct their personal and social identities (Hunt 2010, 105). The concept of "cultural memory" (Assmann 1995), where memories for specific events (in the case of the miners we interviewed, the strike) are maintained through cultural formation is important to consider. In the case of the East Midland coal miners, these include, for example, discussions the miners have about the strike

and their life before and after it, as well as how the strike was represented more widely by the media. The negative portrayal of miners in the media during the strike (see for example Hart 2017), which included the concept of the strike as war and as enemies of the state, persists as a harmful representation.

While official history can shape individual remembrance, personal memories can also come to shape national, “official” histories. According to Berliner, memory ultimately is “the reproduction of the past in the present, this accumulated past which acts on us and makes us act” (Berliner 2005, 201). Research shows that memory is an active part of the meaning-making process, rather than merely a passive depository of facts (Thomson 2010, 82). The importance placed on personal memories changed over time. From the time of the first written histories to the early nineteenth century, the memories of those who participated in events were considered invaluable sources. However, their witnessing status came to be obscured by archival records when history became a professional, academic discipline (Green 2010, 97). After the Second World War, oral history came to once again complement these resources.

3 Language and Memory in Oral History

Various scholars have noticed how “[o]ral history rose to prominence in a particular context, becoming a mass practice in the climate of the 1960s” (Hamilton and Shopes 2008, VIII; Ritchie 2010, 6). It is a method for uncovering unknown stories or giving a voice to people who are not usually heard. Some scholars criticise the value of oral history as history, because memory can be distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past, and the bias of interviewee and interviewer (Thomson 2010; Thomson 2012, 80). In their memory, people may construct stories that satisfy a need to provide a coherent narrative. We can assume that these narratives are systems that are used to make sense of the self and one’s community (see also Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 378). However, it has been suggested that the value of oral history partly lies elsewhere. Hunt and McHale (2008, 46) propose that oral history draws together memory and history by recognising that individual memory is a worthy repository. Oral histories can be seen as counter-history, necessary to challenge official discourse (Briel 2013, 28). How we remember the past and give it meaning helps us to make sense of the the present; providing a way in which the present influences recollection of the past (Thomson 2010, Thomson 2012, 85, 90; Ritchie 2010, 12).

I have argued (Braber and Davies 2016, as have others, such as Roller 2015), that linguists and oral historians should work together more closely as both parties could be enriched by such collaboration. Exploring concepts of identity in people's life stories may include, for instance, looking at particular linguistic features used to express identity (Perks and Robinson 2005). Linguists can also use oral history interviews to collect important data. We can examine which parts of their lives interviewees want to discuss and what they choose to remember. Individuals view experiences as worth remembering if they are relevant to the groups in which they are immersed, and studying such narratives may reveal how communities and individuals make sense of a troubled past (Ritchie 2010, 14). This proved an important aspect of the narratives produced by the miners in the pit talk project. For instance, the idea of a strong community and support network was a crucial element of life for our miners, and this was reflected in many of the interviews and discussions.

The language used by people when they are remembering something can express the different ways in which they try to understand the upheavals and changes they experienced in the past (Thompson 2015, 34). Aspects of language usage include emotional register and pace of voice (Thomson 2012). For example, slowing down may mean greater emphasis or difficulty talking about a topic whereas acceleration can suggest ease or glossing over (Portelli 2015). Facial expression, body movement and mode of talking (Thomson 2012, 345) can also be important. Also worthy of analysis is the use of non-standard language, dialect, silence, tone of voice and volume (Portelli 2015, 50). Portelli adds that the exact length and position of pauses has an important function in the understanding of the meaning of speech. Regular grammatical pauses tend to organise more regularly, whereas pauses of irregular length and position accentuate the emotional content, and very heavy rhythmic pauses recall the style of epic narratives. Some of these linguistic features are not reproducible in transcripts, hence the importance of actual recordings.

Dialectal forms may crop up in digressions or anecdotes, which may coincide with the more personal involvement of the narrator or the intrusion of a crucial memory. They are also sometimes used to quote others when standard varieties are used throughout the rest of the interview. Robinson (2018, 203) notes that emotional language is used far more freely when speaking of the immediate community or the vernacular heritage that taps into memory and is a constituent of a wider narrative of identity (see also Figs 2015). We can also look at the particular pronouns, like 'I' or 'we' and who speakers who use these words are including with these words (Briel 2013, 39). Norrick (2005, 18) suggests that in memory, we construct rather than recall dialogue. We store

the meaning, but not the precise form of speech, so the precise wording may be misremembered. We use words and meanings that allow us to construct memories we are comfortable with or to remake memories that feel unsafe to us (Thomson 2012, 344). Thus, it makes sense to look at particular word choices. Briel (2013, 36), for example, recalls a recording where the interviewee discusses where they have lived and mentions they “moved” to another location, while this move was a forced repatriation. Briel comments that this choice for more neutral, rather than emotive vocabulary, is quite telling. Such word choices were also important in my interviews, as we can consider words like ‘scab’ which feature heavily on social media, but are rarely used within my interviews.

4 The Mining Strike and Its Aftermath

In the 1970s, coal lost its biggest customers due to severe cutbacks in the iron and steel industry (Franks 2001, 66). Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher believed the coal industry should be self-supporting and privatised (Griffin 1989, 188–9). In 1981, it was announced that 50 pits and 30,000 jobs would disappear to meet government targets. Three years later, Thatcher announced the privatisation of the mining industry with more closures; she stated that “the coal industry had come to symbolize everything that was wrong with Britain” (Freese 2003, 240).

The mining unions sensed worse to come (Freese 2003, 241) and decided to take action. The resulting miners’ strike of 1984–85 across Britain was a major industrial action aimed at preventing closures (Gildea 2023; Paterson 2014). It was led by Arthur Scargill of the NUM against the National Coal Board (NCB), a government agency. Opposition to the strike by the Conservative government was led by Thatcher, who called the strikers and organisers “the enemy within” (Gildea 2023, 213). The NUM was divided over the action, and many mine-workers, especially in Nottinghamshire and other areas in the East Midlands, worked throughout the dispute. They did not follow the national strike because Scargill had called the action without a nationwide ballot, which was deemed unconstitutional (Griffin 1989, 201). The refusal to strike and the setting up of a new union, the UDM, weakened the position of the NUM (Cricher et al. 1995, 13). The main strike started on 6 March 1984 with a walkout at Cortonwood Colliery, which led to the NUM’s Yorkshire area’s sanctioning of a strike on the grounds of a ballot result from 1981 in the Yorkshire Area. The union’s strategy was to cause a severe energy shortage, which had won victory in the 1972 strike. The government strategy was threefold: to build up ample coal stocks, to keep

as many miners at work as possible and to use police to break up attacks by pickets on working miners.

Violent confrontations between flying pickets and police characterised the year-long strike, ending on 3 March 1985. In some mines, when miners returned to work, striking and non-striking miners had to work together. The “most bitter industrial dispute in British history” ended with a decisive victory for the Conservative government and allowed the closure of most of Britain’s collieries (BBC News.¹) At its height, the strike involved 142,000 mineworkers. One journalist covering the strike estimated that “it has no real parallel – in size, duration and impact – anywhere in the world” (Milne 2004).

The dispute continues “to haunt the present” in many ways: economically, socially and emotionally (Simpson and Simmons 2019, 8). Unemployment figures in the affected regions rocketed (Coates and Barratt Brown 1997, 8, 20). Relations among miners continue to be strained and were further tested when Kellingley, the last deep coalmine in Britain, finished production in December 2015. At the subsequent wake, several participants split from the main crowd and ceremoniously burned a makeshift banner with the painted words “UDM Scabbing Bas**ards!” In 2022, British television drama *Sherwood*, set in north Nottinghamshire and based on real-life murders and a community divided by the strike, resulted in increased media attention for the region. Following this programme, BBC Radio Nottingham included features on the meaning and background of the word “scab.” Recent books dealing with the strike include Gildea (2023), the first oral history account of the strike across Wales, England and Scotland (and contains interviews with miners and their wives from around Nottinghamshire and the East Midlands as well as examining already existing interviews) as well as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson (2023) with the first national coverage of women and the miners’ strike (and also contains interviews with Nottinghamshire and East Midlands women). Abusive messages on social media continue and look set to increase with the advent of the anniversary of the strike in 2024. These social media messages tend to be aimed at those who worked during the strike and can be found on Facebook and Twitter (now X), and others. The specific language usage of these has not yet been investigated. Gildea argues (2023, 25) that memories can be influenced by such interpretations of the strike and that the story of the strike is an “interplay between individual stories and shared stories.”

1 See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/low/dates/stories/march/12/newsid_3503000/3503346.stm

5 The Pit Talk Projects: Methodology

Over five years, we conducted several projects to record miners from around the East Midlands to examine the specific language used by coal miners for tools, job descriptions, and locations above and below ground (Braber et al. 2017; Braber 2022). Interviews with a variety of miners from the different mining communities around the East Midlands were needed to examine to what extent there were local differences between Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, as well as differences between language used in the East Midlands and other mining regions in the UK. Applying the method of “snowball sampling” (Milroy 1987), we allowed the miners we recruited to suggest others to take part in the study.

My work with mining heritage groups is ongoing, to preserve and educate about mining heritage and examine the importance of linguistic heritage as an intangible aspect of this. This work continues to strengthen relationships between mining heritage groups and individuals and me. In our projects, art, music, creative writing and photography have proven effective ways of dealing with the difficult issue of ongoing enmities after the strike. However, things do not always run smoothly. Some mining groups are still unwilling to collaborate with each other or with anyone with certain former political affiliations. For me, acting as a ‘neutral’ go-between is very important and I always try to ensure both sides are involved with any projects or events we run (Braber and Amos 2021). Our current collaboration is with the Coal Authority, where we are using a selection of photographs from their archive to inspire interviews within mining groups. Not only will such information enrich the meta-data the Coal Authority has on these photos, but the photos and recordings can also be used with the wider local community to learn more about miners’ lives.

The data provided below is based on a qualitative linguistic and content analysis of interviews, which were set out in such a way that similar data could be collected while keeping the situation more like an informal chat than formal questioning. To ensure anonymity, the miners will be referred here by using their initials. After recording, the interviews were transcribed orthographically. Each interview was analysed for particular words and themes. In total, we carried out around 70 interviews, and of those, 34 raised issues around the strike, working conditions before, during, and after the strike, and the effects of the strike on the miners and their families. This chapter focusses on the miners’ narratives and considers the issue of spoken language as a specific medium. Some recurring themes are the strong sense of community between the miners, and how this was seen as a very positive factor in their lives. This is reflected

by the occurrence of keywords, such as camaraderie (but not comrades) and infrequent usage of words like “scab.”

Many miners raised camaraderie, stating that miners were like brothers and that no other occupation (other than the armed forces) had a similar relationship. The strike was not specifically raised as a topic by the interviewers, but it was left to individual miners to bring up; quite a large proportion did this and spoke from both sides of the divide. An important aspect of this project was that the interviewers were all female non-miners and two out of the three were not from the East Midlands. This proved helpful as we were seen as ‘neutral’ by the miners, who did not have to worry whether we had been part of the NUM or UDM. The discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider (Foster 1996) versus being an outsider (Rasbridge 1996) of communities is interesting, but in our research being an outsider was certainly a bonus as we were not partisan.

6 Themes

Our interviews differ from other oral histories on this subject (Gildea 2023, Suthcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson 2023) because they were not solely about the strike. The miners were able to raise issues around working conditions and the strike if they chose to do so – almost half did, even though this occurred forty years ago. Furthermore, the discussion of camaraderie and community is so important, as the terrible situation during their daily working lives can tell us about the importance of belonging to such a group.

All miners started their interviews with a short description of their mining history, where they worked, what they did and whether anyone else in their family had been a miner (which was the case for many). At this point, many interviewees mentioned not only that previous male generations in their family had been miners but also that mining was often seen as a job for life and one which many had entered easily when looking for work (especially in cases where family members already worked within a mine). BW explains that the collieries could find a job for “anyone” and “that everyone had a job.” BP says that getting a job in the coal industry was straightforward and often seen as being a career for life. He states:

I left school in 1981. The Coal Board was a big employer at the time the Coal Board would generally take on, I mean the year I started was a typical year where they took on apprentices you see. So if you couldn't get a

job anywhere you were pretty much assured you could get one at the Coal Board. So I left school and tried for loads of jobs. I got offered one at the power station but Staythorpe was at the time ear-marked for closure and they said they could only guarantee us four years, when I went to the pit the guy who interviewed us said you've got a job for life, 30 years, basically if you want it

This topic is raised by several miners; coal mining was often seen as a stable and well-paid job, especially compared with work in factories.

7 The Use of the Word 'Camaraderie'

Generally, the interviewees emphasise the importance of community among miners. Park comments that the toughness of the work below ground meant that miners needed to be able to rely on one another above ground and that this was also often linked to strong political militancy (Park 2000, 223). One of the main themes in all 70 interviews is the strong sense of camaraderie among miners, and the word 'camaraderie' is frequently used. This is a theme seen in other research on mining communities (Gildea 2023, 6). There is a lot of talk about how much they enjoyed their time working in the collieries. MW states that "[e]very miner if you said he could go back, he would. Because the camaraderie down the pit is second to none." AD declares, "it was absolutely brilliant," that there was a real community and the men not only worked but also socialised together through sports clubs and events at the welfare clubs. BB explains that going to the pub together was a big part of life. For many, this camaraderie was crucial because of the harsh working conditions and the dangerous environment that they encountered daily. KC says, "[I]f down the mine was rough, it was depressing. The only thing that actually kept you going down the pit was the camaraderie with your friends and your workmate down the pit." DC adds "[i]t was hard, it was hard, it was very dangerous. I carried three of my mates out that had been killed. We had some good laughs." BH says:

people talk about camaraderie, it's not just camaraderie cos it didn't finish in the pit. You came out of the mine, and you drank with the men, you went on trips with the men, it was more family than anything, you were literally like brothers, you always got somebody watching your back, you know, I've seen, to be quite honest, I've seen people go down the road, have an argument, go down the road and knock three bells out of one another and come back and that's it, passing a prop, job done. Miners

never ever carry stones, because you never know what's going to happen tomorrow.

The reasoning behind the use of a word like "camaraderie" is never mentioned, it is assumed to be understood and a perpetual part of being in this industry.

Another frequently mentioned aspect of camaraderie was the "banter," consisting of jokes and playful exchanges. DJ says "it was a constant jibing and piss taking, and it was part of the camaraderie that was down there." Being able to deal with this was an essential part of a miner's life. RG explains "you have to be able to take it because if you didn't it was a waste of time you being down there. That was part of the fear factor it took away the fear of what you were doing because you knew you was under strain, you was under pressure, there was a danger there as well so you still had to be semi-serious in what you were doing. You're not just looking after your life you're looking after somebody else's life at the same time." MM, the canteen worker we interviewed, states that:

[t]hey were like brothers you know, it was one big family. Because everybody had somebody, it was uncles, it weren't just fathers and sons, it was uncles everybody seemed to be related in some way and because of the difficulty with going down the pit and obviously they knew that every time they went down it was a big risk to their health and to survive really. They had to trust each other especially when they worked closely with each other. And they built that up because they worked the same shifts.

It is mentioned that when miners got older or were injured, jobs were frequently found to ensure they could continue working. Helping each other was a common theme, BB says "if you were struggling, someone would come and help you, if they were struggling you'd go and help them. There was no, you know, like lay and struggle. None of that. Or if you've seen a tub off the rails, used to go and help pick and put it back on. You'd never walk by. You'd never see anybody struggle." SF explains "we all look after each other. When we are underground we look after each other. If someone is struggling you help them and that's how it is. You wouldn't get by without looking after each other. The closeness of it."

BP comments that "everybody spoke to each other, so the camaraderie everyone said 'you all right mate' in fact you used to get a dry throat from saying hello as you used to walk in and walked out, that went when the old miners went that part camaraderie went." DA adds "[o]ver the years you've known literally thousands and thousands of men. And every one of them because of that turnover has got a story, you know summit had happened and they had

a story to tell.” This camaraderie is something that many interviewees miss in contemporary life. PR says:

I miss the friends. Because the comrades that you have down the pit are like, I would imagine it’s very similar to sort of friends and comrades that you’d have in the army or something. Because everybody trusts each other and watches each other’s backs. You could have an argument with somebody, an almighty argument with somebody but two minutes later it’s forgotten about and working together again.

KS adds “They were brilliant. You could fall out with each other but if anybody was in trouble they were there.” The issue of camaraderie is frequently raised at the very beginning of the interview, forming a focus of many of the stories told. This close connection between miners and the strong bond they felt formed a part of almost all of the interviews conducted as part of these projects. For many it was the most important aspect of not only their working life, but life in general.

PR’s account offers an example of use of the word “comrade,” but overall in the interviews this occurs only occasionally. Very few miners use the words “brotherhood,” “comrade” or “solidarity,” and “camaraderie” and “community” are preferred. This could be linked to the fact that for many, terms such as “brotherhood” and “solidarity” are more politically loaded, particularly left-leaning politics. These interviews did not foreground political affiliation, and very few were active members of the union. Although several miners interviewed did strike, the word “scab” is rarely used. This is likely to be very different in other regions of the UK, where striking was more prevalent and very strong feelings still hold to this day about the Nottinghamshire region. In much of the social media discourse surrounding the strike, the word “scab” is very common and a frequent derogatory statement made about working miners. Within these interviews, even those striking miners rarely use this word. It appears to be seen as a word mainly used by more militant miners and dispreferred in face-to-face conversations.

8 Talking about the Strike

When talking about the strike, many interviewees start at the run up of the strike and what was happening to them during this time. BP explains “they said the following week they was going to have a meeting, a union meeting and we’d have a vote on it. We voted at the time that the Midland section which ended up being UDM we’re not voting for the strike we’re voting for a vote and

once we've had a vote we'll vote on it but Arthur said no we're not having a vote." This idea of not been given the vote to strike is an issue raised by many interviewees who ended up working throughout the strike period.

Some of the miners interviewed explain how they could not strike because of their position, either as apprentices or managers. BP explains:

we all got a little badge with a photo on it as an apprentice so that I could get through the picket lines because apprentices weren't allowed to go on strike. If you did you lost your apprenticeship so I had to keep going through so even since then I've spoke to miners still tarred with that brush for being a working miner. I was an apprentice at the time so there's not an awful lot I could have done about it because they would have sent you off the training centre anyway.

NC says:

I was in Forest town then, '84, but I had to work 12-hour shift at Clipston. I had to take the part of a deputy, 'cause with being management staff, the deputies were on strike as well you see. Some of the men wasn't, and they wanted to keep turning coal. Management staff had to go and do deputy's jobs, which I did. They thanked us, you know, coal board, hierarchy, but I didn't like taking part in it, 'cause I were on strike in '72 and then after strike I went on staff, I went to be a deputy.

LM explains that as mechanic he was nominated by the NUM to work, but he got a lot of abuse from his friends and the picket line for crossing it. BB says that as a surveyor he had to go to work, but after an initial crossing of the picket line, where miners tried to overturn his car, they realised who he was, "and every day after that when I went to work they just saw me coming and they went away and just waved to me as I went by."

The situation was fraught in Nottinghamshire and other parts of the East Midlands coalfield which did not strike. BP says "it ended up being martial law in Nottinghamshire they called it Highland Nottingham cos you couldn't get in or get out so everyone was being pulled up." GB explains "[f]ortunately at our pit there weren't so many on strike because it was south, south of the border [with Yorkshire], but north of the border, miners there was lots of them. I can remember watching and the news and thinking what's happening is crazy. I mean it's like the breakaway. I was in the NUM but then I went into the UDM." ABS who was union secretary for the NUM states that "all our phones were bugged, I can tell you that for nowt. [...] All the lads on the NUM I worked

with went out on strike and they all finished, they didn't get back. It's like the '26 strike, there were no victimisation – bunkum! There was victimisation.” DC relates “when I was on strike I broke my leg playing football and a television crew came up to me and asked me, off the record, they wasn't filming, how I'd broke my leg and I told them a police officer had kicked me.” Tension between communities was high and continued for many years. Relationships changed. The strong sense of camaraderie that so many mention seemed to change during this time. BP explains that “it set man against man.”

There are real differences in opinion on who was to blame. MC explains:

everybody says the Notts miners broke the strike. Notts miners on average were out on strike, take Cotgrave for instance there were over a hundred Welsh people working only three of us were on strike. Most of the Scots were working, Yorkshire most of them were working so the actual Notts miners it's a fallacy when you say the Notts miners broke the back of the strike. It was these gypsies, like I was a gypsy we were up from Wales. It was all the different nationalities that broke the strike.

The role of Scargill is often raised (especially by those who worked; this is also a theme raised by Gildea's interviewees), GB comments “[s]ome of the UDM were [on strike], but not all. They took away, Arthur Scargill said you will go on strike, and we were democratic. It were just not right what he was doing. He was still living like a king.” DC also believes that Scargill's behaviour was the cause of many miners not striking. He says:

before any strike we would have a national ballot to see what the miners wanted, if they said no we wouldn't go on strike, if they said yes, we would. He decided he wanted a strike but he wouldn't have a ballot, because he knew, even his own men wouldn't go on strike. So there were a lot of bully boys about, hard cases if you like, very militant miners, and if you didn't go on strike they would intimidate them, one way or another, smash your windows, smash your car, intimidate your wife and kids till you did go on strike. That was in Yorkshire, that was. And so it was an illegal strike basically really and he wouldn't give us a vote so we said if you are not giving us votes and of course they came down in their masses, flying pickets, while you was at the pit smashed by these pickets, you stuck your fingers up and said 'Sod you,' if you are going to come and do this to us, it made you more not go on strike, you know what I mean.

AW feels that both sides were making promises to get miners on their side, “I think we could have stopped it. There was a year of that and we could have stopped it. We got a strike mandate eighty odd per cent and didn’t use it. Got bought off with a load of lies.” Still to this day there is a very strong feeling on each side that they behaved in the correct way and that the other side was wrong. Those who worked through felt they needed a ballot to be able to strike, whereas those who did strike felt that the Nottinghamshire miners were to blame for the closure of the mines.

9 Life after the Strike

Once the strike ended and many miners’ working lives resumed, working and striking miners had to work together again. Many friendship groups changed depending on which of their friends and colleagues had joined the strike or not. DC says “[a]fter the strike, all the people I knocked about with, they worked all the time, and I’d been on strike so I had a new circle of friends.” GB comments that these were interesting times as the “dialogue had gone” between people and that there was little talking. LM mentions similar sentiments: “[t]hey all carried on in their own way. For an example at Markham we had lots of problems. We had about eight coal faces at the time and they wouldn’t work with each other so we had to keep them in the teams they were in before. Which made it from a management point of view and for control, a bit awkward. The men used to rule in those days, to a degree anyway.” AB finds the working situation had changed:

I mean, after the strike there were a bit of aggro, with people who worked and people who didn’t work, like. I remember going back, first day I went back, and I saw somebody and I said, aye up so-an-so, and somebody says to me, you’re not talking to him are ya? He worked all the time and I didn’t know. And then you were underground and that hostility were there like, all the time.

DC comments that the camaraderie completely changed after the strike.

AW elaborates “they came from all over NUM, UDM you’d employ people and they’d say I’m not working with UDM. I used to say you are British Coal miners you work where you are told or you don’t work, get on with it. There weren’t many like that but there were some.” In AB’s experience, working

relations were poor and it was felt by some that managers supported the working miners. He explains:

we were knocking off, off of days, about half past one, and afternoon shift were coming in, and they were three what had worked. They were three scabs. And I says, oh, scabs are here. And overman said, you can't call them that. I said that's a shovel look, that's a ringer [an adjustable spanner], and that's a scab. But they started saying you couldn't use the word scab, but I forget what we used to call them then. Meaning the same thing, we called them another word, like Rupert or something, you know, and everyone knew what Rupert meant. If gaffer heard you calling them scab you got your hand smacked.

Here we can see an example where the scab was seen as a swear word by many and as a word which needed to be avoided. Many who had gone on strike had to move pits as some miners refused to work with them. BP explains “[t]hey'd throw buckets of piss on him on the pit bottom, spit on him and it got to the point where most of the strike breakers, black legs they called them, or scabs ended up in a Nottinghamshire coalfield cos they couldn't work there.” GB describes changes that were hard to deal with:

When they announced the pit closure, my pit, I were devastated, absolutely devastated 'cause my way of life had gone. My kids had never wanted for nowt, 'cause I worked hard and I played hard and they took it all away. We still had to turn up for work, so we'd go, I travelled to Cotgrave with my snap, get to work, and they'd say no, we don't want you. Even though you've been a loyal employee for all them years, no go home. That's how they'd speak to us and we were devastated. I couldn't eat for 4 days, 4 days without owt to eat because I was numb. Mortified.

Most interviewees echo such sentiments. One of the exceptions, MC, states that “once you got on the job it was so dangerous that if someone was working there you were watching. Even after the strike. You had no worries about your safety, you put that aside.” RC adds “[e]ven before and after the strikes we didn't have any troubles.” BP comments that miners should not fall out because the powers above had destroyed the mining industry. He says “because at the end of the day Scargill did what Thatcher wanted anyway so she actually had a reason to close all the pits down. The strike finished in 1985 within 18 months they started shutting the Nottinghamshire pits down and they said they would look after you.” BW also mentions that Thatcher got rid of the mines and this

destroyed mining communities. ABS explains “[t]he ’85 strike it was a tragedy in the sense that a lot of decent fellows fell out and that. The writing was on the wall after [...] Because once she won, there was no messing about and bang. It all went very quickly.” DC adds “[w]e had 36,000 miners in Nottinghamshire, and we’ve got about 400 now. 36,000 before the strike, 400 now after, so you can see the knock-on effect in the area.” These effects were long lasting. MC talks about falling out with his father-in-law because of the strike, “[w]hen we had a family do we never spoke we just avoided each other, we went to the same parties but we never spoke and it was hard for me wife.” DC talks about a father and son who fell out over the strike:

So there were a lot of miners in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire who did go on strike and it caused splits among the families. Now you had the father who had more sense, went to work and I’d see them up Moorgreen pit, the father would tell me, walk through six pickets, but his son was on the picket line and spitting at his dad! Coz the young lad, he was full of beans and didn’t understand the situation as much as his father did. And it caused, I’ve spoken to the young lad since, well he’s not young, he says he was wrong and he never talked to his dad again and his dad died.

The overwhelming feeling was that the strike had changed the camaraderie and brotherhood of the miners and that the situation before the strike never returned. Only a small minority reported good relations between miners after the strike and it was also felt that by falling out the miners had given the Conservative government what it wanted and allowed them to destroy the mines and their communities.

10 Conclusion

Narratives can assist attempts to develop a coherent memory of the past and make sense of our lives. Although individual recollections can change (due to media influence for example), the discourse of our miners remains stable, even after forty years. They often recall the camaraderie in and around the mines, and the destruction of these relationships after the strike of 1984–85. Many of these themes have clearly been discussed before, often between miners. Such discourses can change memories, as the individual fills in fragmentary impressions with aspects of others’ recollections. Therefore, many of the interviewees agree with each other and conclude that, for them, life changed after the

strike. However, the changes following the end of coal mining in the region were even more far-reaching than the strike, as communities were destroyed, and this probably had a profound influence on the individual as well as on the communal memory of the interviewees, which made the recollection of the camaraderie from their working lives even more poignant. Although the main focus of these interviews was on pit talk, the continuing importance of the strike and the camaraderie that formed part of life and community remained of utmost importance to these former miners. Concepts of identity can change throughout one's lifetime (Tarrow 2013, 142), and for many of these miners, the effect of the strike on camaraderie was difficult to discuss, as it affected the more nostalgic feeling of belonging which epitomised the sense of being a miner. In the same way, many avoided using the word "scab," although it features strongly in other representations of this time.

In a "community of memory" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994), individuals bond with others based on shared experiences. This affects many of the interviewees, who seem to have a 'rose-tinted' view of the past, specifically regarding the sense of camaraderie they experienced under the harsh working conditions. The interviews showed that all miners felt that there had been a very strong sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that epitomised life as a miner. For many, the strike destroyed such relations, and life was never the same. Even forty years after the strike, feelings of resentment and anger remained on both sides of the strike. However, it seems that for many, the strong sense of camaraderie and community which was at the heart of being a miner has remained, even after forty years. The use of these words signals the strong sense of affinity miners experience with each other and the sense that no one outside their community could understand this feeling of belonging together and relying on one another for their personal safety underground. It seems that "camaraderie" has a symbolic resonance (see Tarrow 2013, 194) that few other words have – it has come to mean what it is to be a miner and to belong to this group who understood the dangers underground and what it takes to survive.

Certain recollections are also very definitive, leaving little room for dialogue or disagreement. To quote Gildea's interviewees (2023, 368): "It's not going to go away" is followed up by "and we're not going to forgive either." The miners in these interviews are keen to remember the very strong camaraderie, but for many this was destroyed during the strike and pit closures. With "the pits gone" and "we all believed we were right," almost insurmountable words and unmoveable images are passed down the generations and forms of enmity seem to have become formulaic in their discourse. So much so that both sides – workers and strikers – are unlikely to be able to meet, never mind discuss their collective memory. Unless, of course, we give them a helping hand.

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Performing Protest, Performing Memory: Speech Act Theory and January 6

Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill

1 Introduction

In daily life, memory performs a staggering array of tasks. It offers reassurance, validation, legitimation, and approval. It transgresses boundaries and polices them. It confirms understandings and undermines them. It warms our hearts and chills our blood. In the realm of protest, as this article will show, memory works through intentional language use. In the context of activism, acts of memory are often performative: they aim not just to restate the status quo, but to change something about it. This chapter operationalises J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory (1994, SAT) as a lens through which to examine how the contentious discourse of former President Donald Trump on January 6, 2021, particularly his "Save America" speech, has promoted false configurations of the past to shape the future. SAT facilitates an exploration of the role of discourse in the memory-activism nexus, defined as "the mutual entanglements and feedback loops between *memory activism* (contentious action to promote certain memories), the *memory of activism* (acts of remembrance about earlier social movements), and *memory in activism* (the role of memory in new acts of contention)" (Rigney 2021, 299). Discourse routines, including those of contention, reside in a culture's collective memory, where they are nurtured, grounded, and animated to shape future memory. SAT provides a framework to see these in action, prompting analysis of the actual performance of a speech act, itself, the choices and intentions behind it, and its subsequent effects. This exploration of performativity in activism moves through a brief overview of the 2020 American electoral context, followed by a consideration of SAT in relation to the memory-activism nexus. An SAT analysis of Trump's speech follows these sections before the chapter closes with concerns about the relationship between discourse and democracy.

2 American Electoral Context

The national election between then-President of the United States (POTUS) Donald Trump, Republican, and former Vice-President Joseph Biden, Democrat, occurred on November 3, 2020. The United States Congress, under Vice-President of the United States (VPOTUS) Mike Pence as President of the Senate, certified the election on January 6, despite various attempts by Trump to prevent this. Trump's claims that the election was fraudulent, particularly in his "Save America" speech, had provoked his supporters to attack the U.S. Capitol earlier that day. Moreover, on election night, even before all the votes had been counted, Trump declared, "This is a fraud on the American public. This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election [...] We want all voting to stop" (Select 2022, 135).

This declaration was premeditated, as evidenced in multiple written communications to the White House from Tom Fitton of Judicial Watch on October 31 and November 3, 2020, and by an audio recording of Trump advisor Steve Bannon on 31 October 2020:

[W]hat Trump's gonna do is just declare victory [...] But that doesn't mean he's the winner. He's just gonna say he's the winner [...] if Trump is losing, by 10 or 11 o'clock at night, it's going to be even crazier [...] he's gonna sit right there and say "They stole it. I'm directing the Attorney General to shut down all ballot places in all 50 states. (Select 2022, 10–11)

Thus, even before the results were in, Trump declared the election stolen. The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (Select Committee) has labelled Trump's claim the 'Big Lie.'

3 Speech Act Theory and Performative Utterances

SAT elucidates the work we do with words, including perpetrating frauds and inciting insurrections, but also certifying elections. SAT also shapes daily life by distinguishing between utterances that state facts, like the sky is blue, the earth is round, or the sun rises in the east, and those that do significant social work like making promises, sentencing criminals, or declaring war. Austin calls these reality altering utterances *speech acts* or *performatives*, in which the saying is the doing, and contrasts them with constative utterances, in which the saying is simply stating.

With this distinction, Austin recognises that to say something is not “always and simply to *state* something” (1994, 12, original emphasis). The work of Austin and others (e.g., Kaburise 2011, Clark 2022, Oo et al. 2023) therefore distinguishes between language stating propositions and language performing actions, such as:

- apologising: “I apologise for ... ” spoken by an offender;
- warning: “I warn you that ... ” spoken by a police officer; or
- sentencing: “I sentence you to ... ” spoken by a judge.

Such performative utterances reveal language as productive of the social reality it references, both at the sentence level, as in the examples above, and at the level of discourse, as in a speech. Language not only reports or describes reality, but it also creates, constructs, and affects it. As Charles Clark notes, “the crucial observation inherent in performative utterances is not that they are unique words that have an effect, but instead that speaking words alone can have tangible and definable effects on the world at all” (2022, 383). Since Austin, scholars have uncovered a rich variety of speech events in which performativity comes into play, including the ‘protest performative’, discussed in more depth below (Hill 2018).

Performatives are possible because of the cultural memory (Erll 2011) of linguistic conventions surrounding the work done with, by, and through words. Performatives are often ritualised discursive actions, embedded in a language’s repertoire, which a culture uses to change the world in some way. A threat is made. War is declared. A child is christened. And everyone knows it because the discourse routines reside deeply within the memory of the community and can be activated at appropriate times and places by the appropriate people. From a discourse perspective, such speech acts have pragmatic legitimacy because their speakers and hearers accredit them as particular actions that create, construct, or reflect reality (Hill 2018, 9).

Austin excavates these discourse routines from cultural memory and articulates the conditions and conventions necessary for their successful completion. These conditions include “the uttering of particular words by particular people in particular circumstances [that] will produce a particular effect,” and that everyone involved in such a discourse routine carries it out properly, with the appropriate thoughts, feelings, intentions, and sincere follow through of any subsequent act dictated by the routine (Austin 1994, 14–15). When these conditions are all met, Austin declares the speech act felicitous, or happily performed.

For example, I may want to reward a student for excellent work by knight-ing her but, unlike a monarch, I have no authority to do that. No matter how often I repeat the words, “I knight thee,” I cannot make my student a knight of

the realm. In this case, the speech act *misfires*. However, I am in a position to promise to clean the house. If I make that promise, then I must honour it by doing the work. My intention must be to do the cleaning, and I must then act on it. When the appropriate person says the appropriate words with sincerity and the appropriate intention, the performative utterance is felicitously fulfilled. When someone is insincere or dishonest in their speaking, or when they fail to follow through on the obligation of the speech act, the performative fails through *abuse*. For example, if I am dishonest, have no intention of cleaning the house and do not do it, then I abuse the performative of a promise.

To probe the granularity of performativity, Austin establishes the tripartite structure of the speech act: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act or effects. The locutionary act is the actual speaking of an utterance. The illocutionary act is what is performed by the speaking, such as ordering, threatening, or suggesting. It involves the intention of the speaker, revealed in the chosen form or genre of the utterance, along with the social work that occurs in it, which we name *orders*, *threats*, *appointments*, *dismissals*, etc. (Austin 1994, 151–64). The perlocutionary act involves the subsequent effects of the combined locutionary and illocutionary acts, like the answer to the request, the following of the command, or the acceptance of the invitation.

Locutionary and illocutionary acts are generally simultaneous, such as a warning being issued through the utterance itself, whereas the perlocutionary act(s) occur afterwards, such as the uptake of a warning. For example, saying “There’s a rattlesnake in the yard” is a locutionary act; the warning resulting from saying these words is an illocutionary act; while the decision not to enter the yard is a perlocutionary act or effect.

Austin contends that the illocutionary is “conventional, in the sense that it can be made explicit by a performative formula” but the perlocutionary act cannot be. “Thus, we can say ‘I argue that’ [...] but we cannot say ‘I convince you that [...]’ ” (1994, 103–4, 110). In other words, performative conventions, grounded in the ritualised collective memory of past performance, cannot be extended to perlocutionary effects, which often are unpredictable, as evidenced on January 6.

4 Performative Utterances and the Memory-Activism Nexus

All three of these dimensions, the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary of the speech act, regularly come into play within the memory-activism nexus. As speakers promote certain memories, remember earlier social movements, or animate memory in new acts of contention, they do so through

particular forms and genres, such as chants, dedications, or commemorative speeches. This is where the locutionary act comes into operation.

For the illocutionary act, the choice of a particular genre or form for the locutionary utterance makes the internal process of intention visible. For example, a protester may choose the genre of a chant. This choice then invites the audience into the diachronic collective memory associated with that chant and how to perform it. Across time, such discourse routines are stabilised, even ritualised, within the collective memory of a community. Such shared memory facilitates the interpretation of protests both synchronically at the point of production and diachronically, by drawing from the intertextuality of its use across time. For example, consider the basic form of “I am ...”

The signs in Florida in 2012 of ‘I am Trayvon Martin’ are links to T-shirts proclaiming ‘I am Mohamed Bouazizi’ in Tunisia in 2011, which are links to the feminist anthem ‘I am Woman’ by Australian Helen Reddy in 1972, which is a link to the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers’ strike cry of ‘I am a Man,’ which is a link to the British abolitionist question of ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ and so forth, until we reach a slave uprising in ancient Rome via Hollywood in 1960 with the cry of ‘I am Spartacus,’ which in turn was a tweet that went viral in 2010, when Paul Chambers was accused of threatening to blow up an English airport, that in turn was reconfigured after the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris into ‘*Je suis Charlie*’ (I am Charlie) in 2015, and tragically, again, in 2020 with ‘I am George Floyd.’ (Hill 2018, 15)

The choice of “I am ...” facilitates the interface of past with present, as it animates its deep well of interconnected social networks and corresponding collective memories and history. In conjuring these traditions, ritualised short-form utterances carry rich information about the speaker’s intention (i.e., condemning, rallying, dedicating), indispensable for the speech act to occur.

The perlocutionary effect of uptakes, like those associated with January 6 – i.e., accepting the invitation to attend the rally, obeying the directive to march on the Capitol, proceeding “to fight like hell because you won’t have a country left” – often behave as a sort of chain reaction with one leading to another or as a set of ripples emanating from the original speech event. These reactions and ripples have the potential to enhance, instigate, promote, legitimate, validate, invalidate, credit, or discredit the performative utterance. They may, for instance, complete the utterance felicitously, despite speaker intention and the immediate synchronic moment of the locutionary act, or, conversely, fail to uptake.

A common perlocutionary effect is the immediate or delayed uptake of memory activism by promoting a particular memory. For example, in a protest use of a call and response during a Trans Day of Remembrance march, the call, “Say their names ...” is completed with the uptake of its response, the chanting of individual names from the annual memorial list of slain transgender people. This may, in turn, connect to a delayed perlocutionary effect of memory in activism, when activists incorporate that list into new in-person or digital protests, or memory of activism, when they incorporate it into remembrances of events like the Stonewall Riots.

Thus, Austin’s performative Speech Act Theory provides a useful lens through which we can explore the memory work we do through contentious words, and more specifically, through protest performatives. For the following analysis, it is important to note that for a protest performative, the locutionary act is driven by the protester’s illocutionary intention to challenge power dynamics non-violently, generating the perlocutionary effect of change (Hill 2018, 41). This definition seems to parallel the locutionary and illocutionary aspects of what might be called an “insurrection performative,” a speech act which also strives to change the status quo. However, protest and insurrection performatives differ regarding permissible perlocutionary effects, as insurrection also includes the effect of “rising in arms or open resistance against established authority or governmental restraint” (Insurrection), but protest does not. Trump labels the “Save America” speech as protest; the Select Committee labels it as insurrection. Over the last couple of years, the convictions of Capitol rioters for insurrection have reinforced the Select Committee’s choice over Trump’s (Office 2023).

With SAT framing our understanding of language use in the memory-activism nexus, the following analysis examines Trump’s contentious language of January 6 in relation to the manifold entanglements of remembrance on this memorable day. First is the brief presentation of the locutionary act, itself, and the speech acts leading up to and feeding into this speech event. This is followed by a detailed investigation into the illocutionary act and its vacillation between protest and insurrection, as it engages in different feats of memory activism. The discussion then turns to the perlocutionary act, with its own corresponding vacillation.

5 Locutionary Acts

Trump delivers the locutionary act of his “Save America” speech at the Ellipse, in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, between 11:57 a.m. and 1:11 p.m. The

speech consists of 10, 973 words, with a Flesh Kincaid reading score of 5.4 (fifth-grade level at the fourth month of instruction). The speech contains over 100 false claims (Select 2022, 76, 232). Two viral locutionary acts of December 2020 precede this speech. One is an invitation to the protest on January 6 via a Tweet, and the other is an accusation of election fraud via a Facebook video:

Invitation Tweet of December 19, 2021: Peter Navarro releases 36-page report alleging election fraud ‘more than sufficient’ to swing victory to Trump <https://t.co/D8KrMHnFdK>. A great report by Peter. Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild! (Donovan et al. 2022, 14).

Excerpt from Accusation, December 22, 2021, Facebook Video: This year, using the virus as a pretext, Democratic officials in the key swing states illegally violated their own state laws, in order to enable, encourage, and facilitate fraud on a scale never before seen in the history of our country [...] The truth is we won by a landslide (ibid).

Many January 6 protesters cite these two locutionary acts as motivations for attending the speech. The illocutionary act of the invitation is to encourage attendance and perpetuate the Big Lie. The illocutionary act of the accusation is to further the Big Lie, venturing into memory activism, by promoting the false memory “of fraud on a scale never before seen in the history of our country.” A primary perlocutionary effect of both of these locutions is attendance at the speech.

These two locutionary acts, with their corresponding illocutionary and perlocutionary ones, foreshadow Trump’s January 6 speech. Together then, these three locutionary acts of invitation, accusation, and speech, are recognisable discourse routines, grounded in the collective and cultural memory of general and political usage of American English, ready for Trump to deploy.

6 Illocutionary Acts

The illocutionary act of Trump’s “Save America” speech continues the trajectory of the Big Lie while upending other aspects of presidential rhetoric. Presidential speeches are generally performances of particular genres doing very specific work (Kohrs Campbell and Jamieson 1990), with attendant socio-political expectations. The most familiar of these mark the distinct seasons of the presidency: inauguration, state of the union, and farewell. Characterised by presidential attempts to unify the American people, these speech acts

generally promote shared values. Other presidential genres include those of veto, war, impeachment, and pardon. These generally promote presidential attempts to persuade the American people toward a particular position.

Because of its generic rootedness in social remembrance, the choice of presidential genre activates performative expectations, such as an inauguration unifying the country after an election. The audience knows what to expect because they are fluent in the pragmatic legitimacy of these genres. Occupying a position of institutional power (i.e., president, senator, congressional representative) disqualifies one from the role of protester, as protesters direct their grievances to the occupants of those very positions, who have other means of influence available to effect change. Thus, the discourse of protest is unavailable to a sitting president. Trump's choice to nevertheless engage in it compromises the felicity of his claimed speech act since his position initiates a misfire of it.

Despite this misfire, as a use of memory in a new act of contention, this choice performs memory in activism. Drawing from the deep syntactic and semantic conventions of the nation's shared memory of presidential discourse and then transgressing them, is a novel presidential choice for a novel presidential act of contention at the level of language, itself. These transgressions are new in several ways: Trump, as a president, is the wrong person, who utters the wrong words, reveals the wrong intention, and fails to fulfil the sincerity condition, for the protest genre (Hill 2018).

The performative also misfires because Trump proposes transgressing Constitutional limits on presidential power, declaring a "very different set of rules" to address his claims of fraud. Even if Trump had been re-elected, the president does not have the authority to reinterpret the U.S. Constitution. That is a judicial duty, not an executive one. No amount of Trump's saying it is so will make it so:

[They say] the Constitution doesn't allow me to send them [slates of electors] back to the States. Well, I say, yes it does, because the Constitution says you have to protect our country [...] and you can't vote on fraud. And fraud breaks up everything, doesn't it? When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by very different rules. (2021)

Trump's words cannot bring into existence "very different rules." Through breaching positional authority and promoting false content, the speech act misfires as a performative of protest and shifts it toward insurrection.

Along with a protest speech being the wrong genre choice for a president who also does not have the authority to alter the U.S. Constitution, the speech

also compromises its felicity in terms of the words spoken. Trump does not advocate for change, a key aspect of a protest performative (Hill 2018), but instead for maintaining the status quo. The *genre* he chooses is one of change, but his *performance* is not one of change. This is despite the fact that he deploys binary linguistic strategies characteristically associated with protest. Binary linguistic strategies in protest performatives generally sharpen division between activists and those in power, instead of reinforcing the status quo. Trump, however, sows division through these strategies to reinforce the status quo, particularly through the binary expressions of (1) specific versus generalised others, (2) *us* versus *them*, and (3) if / then conditional warnings.

Trump contrasts specific individuals (e.g., Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Mike Pence) with generalised others (e.g., Big Tech, Democrats, Media) to cast a range of villains in his fraud narrative. In doing so, his semantic field of danger expands to create a sense of the enemy as being everywhere, increasing fear and anxiety among his supporters, while casting the opposition as those imperilling American democracy. Such binary structuring, moreover, provides “a formative way in which acts of remembering are organized in experience, making reconstruction and reconsolidation more attainable” (Reavey 2017, 107). For committed supporters, like those at the Ellipse, such a binary contrast can sublimate critical questioning and contribute to reconsolidation by providing a ready-made pool of Others.

This pool is then available for Trump to reference when he intensifies his vilification of them through his choice of personal pronouns, dividing the world into *Us* and *Them*, a second binary strategy. Pronoun usage, particularly that of first-person pronouns (I/we/us) in opposition to third-person pronouns (they/them), is an established strategy to distinguish supporters from opponents (Hill 2005). Kris Deschouwer and Martina Temmerman’s work (2012) shows that when politicians in ruling parties employ *we* in a public utterance, it is most often used as an “inclusive we,” referencing the entire country or government. When politicians from the opposition employ the pronoun, the *we* tends to be more exclusive, referring predominantly to their party and membership.

Trump upends these patterns. First, as the sitting POTUS, he does not employ inclusive *we* to reference the entire country. Instead, he consistently uses an exclusive *we* to segregate himself and his supporters from those opposed to them. Second, Trump not only positions himself and his supporters against a series of expected *thems* – Democrats, Big Tech, Media – but he also further subdivides referents, targeting members of his Republican party, including Mike Pence, stating, “I hope Mike has the courage to do what he has to do. And I hope he doesn’t listen to the RINOs [Republicans in Name Only] and the stupid people that he’s listening to [...] We must stop the steal” (Trump 2021).

Trump then warns the audience they may be facing “the end of the Republican Party as *we* know it, but it’s never going to be the end of *us*” (2021, emphasis added). This repetition of *Us/Them* intensifies social sharedness, marking “the degree to which individuals hold something in common with others ... [including] preferences, motives, norms, cognitions, and identities” (Smith and Tindale 2022, 264), as well as political memories. Trump’s repeated usage of a vague *they* also reinforces this: “*They* still don’t have any idea what the votes are. We still have congressional seats under review. *They* have no idea. *They’ve* totally lost control. *They’ve* used the pandemic as a way of defrauding the people in a proper election” (2021, emphasis added). No direct referent immediately precedes this serial usage of *They*. However, because Trump has repeatedly seeded this ground with generalised and specific enemies, his audience can quickly supply their referent of choice.

Finally, Trump (2021) issues a litany of if/then binary conditional warnings throughout the speech, positing dire consequences if they fail to “stop the steal.” These include:

Because history is going to be made. We’re going to see whether or not [...] we have leaders that should be ashamed of themselves throughout history, throughout eternity [...] If they do the wrong thing, we should never, ever forget what they did.

If you don’t do that [re-do the slates of electors], that means you will have a president [...] who was voted on by a bunch of stupid people who lost all of these states. You will have an illegitimate president.

And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.

Through these warnings, Trump attempts to influence future collective memory, forecasting a time in which supporters are disenfranchised and their country destroyed. As a memory activist, he commands they should never forget the “stupid people” and “what they did” in support of “an illegitimate president.” Folded into this command is a *saudade*, or melancholic yearning, for a once great America. Trump directly connects his projection of the future memory of the day’s events with powerful motivators like shame, history, and eternity, commanding his followers to remember and hold *them* accountable for *their* shameful actions. He threatens Republicans directly, stating, “you have to get your people to fight. And if they don’t fight, we have to primary the hell out of the ones that don’t fight” (2021). This threat has been enacted, as exemplified by “primarying” and defeat of Republican Representative Liz Cheney, Vice-Chair of the Select Committee in 2022, one of the many perlocutionary effects of Trump’s speech act.

Trump closes his speech with the most problematic of these warnings: “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (2021). This warning, encouraging violence, contributes significantly to the speech evolving from protest to insurrection, as Cheney’s committee recognises. The repetition of these if/then warnings intensifies the tenacity of their memory imprint, increasing their chances of being accepted as fact instead of false claims, accusations, and assumptions.

Along with these binary strategies operating at the syntactic-semantic level, Trump also employs semiotic strategies of memory activism to promote certain memories. Opening the speech with an unusual request, Trump (2021) attempts to influence the production of media artefacts capturing the event:

Media will not show the magnitude of this crowd [...] when I turned on today, I looked, and I saw thousands of people here. But you don’t see hundreds of thousands of people behind you because they don’t want to show that.

We have hundreds of thousands of people here and I just want them to be recognized by the fake news media. Turn your cameras please and show what’s really happening out here because these people are not going to take it any longer [...] Turn your cameras, please. Would you show? [...] I’ve never seen anything like it.

While accusing the media of bias, Trump initiates memory activism at the level of image production. He fears they will not produce the necessary visual signs to support his claim of “never seeing anything like it.” According to the testimony of Cassidy Hutchinson, Assistant to presidential Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, Trump wanted “the shot,” portraying the crowd as a massive groundswell of support (Select 2022, 70). Thus, before he even formally begins his speech, he exercises mnemonic agency over the semiotic representation of the event, revealing his desire to shape the future memory of it.

Finally, Trump’s choice of a protest performative fails to actualise the legitimate intention of civic change and the corresponding sincerity necessary for the felicitous completion of the speech act. Stanley Fish perceptively argued that “intentions are available to anyone who invokes the proper (publicly known and agreed upon) procedures, and [this] also means that anyone who invokes those procedures (knowing that they will be recognised as such) takes responsibility for that intention” (1980, 203–204). This honesty, the intentional consistency between invoking conventions and taking subsequent responsibility, is Austin’s sincerity condition.

Generally, the only evidence of the internal dimensions of a speech act, including sincerity, intentions, thoughts, feelings, and follow-through, is the external manifestations of genre choice and actual performance. The expectation is that the form of the speech act is consistent with the intention and sincerity of the speaker, and that subsequent social actions are consistent with these. However, this is not the case with Trump's speech. External evidence demonstrates that Trump intended for an insurrection, as the Select Committee notes that between Election Day and January 6, Trump or his inner circle engaged in minimally 200 acts of public or private outreach, pressure, and condemnation, targeting either State legislators or State or local election administrators to overturn State election results. Their investigation demonstrates that "[t]here is no question from all the evidence assembled that President Trump did have that intent [to overthrow the election]" (Select 2022, 75). Thus, although Trump framed his speech as an act of protest, it fulfilled the conditions of an insurrection.

The speech act is an abuse because it violates the sincerity condition, as Trump knew its propositional content was false. Cassidy Hutchinson's testimony reinforces this: "The President [was] just raging ... [saying] something to the effect of, 'I don't want people to know we lost, Mark [Meadows]. This is embarrassing. Figure it out. We need to figure it out. I don't want people to know that we lost'" (Select 2022, 20). In this rejection, Trump demonstrated a keen awareness of the loss while pressuring Meadows to publicly suppress the memory of it.

Trump's commitment to insurrection was also evident throughout the "187 minutes," the period between the end of his speech at 1:11 p.m. and 4:17 p.m., when he finally directed the crowd to go home. During this period, Trump conducted an unheard-of exercise of memory activism, directing no photographs be taken of him. This bookends his request at the beginning of his speech for the media to produce particular representations of the crowd. Other types of presidential documentation are also absent during the 187 minutes. The Select Committee's report states:

No photographs exist of the President for the remainder of the afternoon until after 4 p.m. President Trump appears to have instructed that the White House photographer was not to take any photographs. The Select Committee also was unable to locate any official records of President Trump's telephone calls that afternoon. And the President's official Daily Diary contains no information for this afternoon between the hours of 1:19 p.m. and 4:03 p.m., at the height of the worst attack on the seat of the United States Congress in over two centuries. (2022, 77)

This suppression of documentation parallels the absent referent for his enemy *they* in his pronoun use to intensify *us/them* polarisation. Critical Discourse Analysis traditionally asks, “how does hegemonic public discourse control the minds and actions of (less) powerful groups, and what are the social consequences (i.e., social inequality) of this control?” (Van Dijk 2001, 355). Controlling absences, whether they be antecedents of pronouns or presidential documents of accountability, is one such strategy, directly impacting the political crafting of memory by suppressing artifacts in which it can be grounded. This mutual entanglement of language dynamics, at the level of discourse, with the visual, at a broader level of semiosis, is a feat of memory politics par excellence.

7 Perlocutionary Effects

These considerations of the locutionary and illocutionary acts lead now to the consideration of the perlocutionary acts or effects of Trump’s speech. Two of these effects stand out in particular with regard to the memory-activism nexus: the Big Lie and the insurrection at the Capitol.

From late October 2020 through to today, Trump has insisted that the 2020 election was stolen from him. All evidence from the 50 states and the Select Committee refutes this. Nevertheless, Trump refuses to accept this, resulting in the perlocutionary effect of the Big Lie and its subsequent perlocutionary ripples. The December 2020 viral posts presented above, the Be Wild Tweet and the fraudulent Facebook video, are key speech acts of memory activism through which Trump promotes the Big Lie. Their perlocutionary effects in turn include the uptake of these acts by supporters who believed the Big Lie and then attended the “Save America” speech because of it.

The presence of the audience at the Ellipse is a perlocutionary effect of convocativity due to these preceding speech acts of memory activism. A perlocutionary effect of a protest performative, convocativity is the intentional alignment of activists in relation to a protest issue (Hill 2018, 62). By perpetuating the Big Lie, a perlocutionary effect of these two posts is the convoking of Americans into those who believe it and those who do not. Believers then split into those who attended the speech and those who did not, while attendees split between those who stormed the Capitol and those who did not.

In their study of arrested Capitol rioters, Donovan et al. have found that “a significant number of the defendants specifically mentioned or implied that they had come to the Capitol on January 6 at the express invitation of Donald Trump, whom they believed had requested their assistance in ‘defending

democracy' from election fraud" (2022, 3). This belief in fraud reinforces Greene et al.'s findings that false memories often follow false beliefs as "we are particularly susceptible to forming false memories for stories that align with our pre-existing beliefs or political orientations" (2021, 588), especially regarding highly charged issues like election fraud. A subsequent perlocutionary effect of the Big Lie is that it continues to poison current and future memory, with approximately one-third of all Americans believing it, and nearly 70 percent of Republicans believing it. Further ripples of this include the decline of American trust in the electoral system (Agiesta and Edwards-Levy 2023).

Trump's insistence on fraud mobilises the binary opposition strategies in the locutionary and illocutionary acts in an attempt to generate the perlocutionary effect of reifying the Big Lie as fact. In doing so, Trump treats remembrance not as a product, but as a process to be negotiated, handled, circulated, and adjusted to audience tuning (Erl 2011, 89). Social media serves as Trump's ideal instrument for this tuning as intense consumption of platforms, like Twitter or Facebook, accelerates the time between an event's actual happening to its collective perception as a stable product of remembrance and fact.

Along with the chain of perlocutionary effects spreading the Big Lie, Trump engages in memory *in* activism by repeatedly deploying this poisoned memory in his speech, generating the perlocutionary effect of insurrection. Capitol attackers ingested the poisoned memory of fraud and their subsequent actions supported this belief, reinforcing research that suggests "[i]mplantation of false memories can affect subsequent behaviour" (Laney & Loftus 2017), and the formation of a false memory for a fake news story can influence related behavioural intentions, over and above mere exposure to the fabricated story (Greene et al. 2021, 587). Trump supporters, repeatedly and consistently exposed to the Big Lie, responded as directed and marched on the Capitol.

While supporters' goals and motivations range from a desire to peacefully protest to assassinating elected officials, Capitol attackers manifested a common

insidious paranoia that [their] sociocultural status, livelihoods, and way of life were just as much in jeopardy as Trump's hold on the presidency [...] This paranoia, coupled with a deep-seated resentment for the people and groups they see as enemies, and a sincere belief that there was no alternative, nonviolent means of preserving the status quo, underwrote every stated motivation. (Donovan et al. 2022, 3)

Many of the protesters evidently arrived ready to be convoked as insurrectionists. At the Ellipse, supporters' actions were those of protesters listening

to their leader; at the Capitol, their actions became those of insurrectionists, responding to their leader's directive. Attack defendant Kevin Cordon stated "We're here to take back our democratic republic [...] It's clear that this election is stolen, there's just so much overwhelming evidence and the establishment, the media, big tech are just completely ignoring all of it" (Donovan et al. 2022, 15). Attackers, like Cordon, delineate their convocative identity in relation to their willingness to continue to protest and/or move into insurrection. The binary hardening of *us/them* reinforces this sense of righteousness, justifying the violence implicit in Cordon's comments.

Many defendants, like Dale Huttle, currently charged with assaulting a police officer with a flagpole, believe violence is necessary to counter electoral fraud (Select 2022, 73):

Huttle: We were not there illegally, we were invited there by the President, himself [...] Trump's backers had been told that the election had been stolen [...]

Hickey: But do you think he encouraged violence?

Huttle: Well, I sat there, or stood there, with half a million people listening to his speech. And in that speech, both Giuliani and [Trump] said we were going to have to fight like hell to save our country. Now, whether it was a figure of speech or not – it wasn't taken that way.

Hickey: You didn't take it as a figure of speech?

Huttle: No.

Huttle's perlocutionary uptake of Trump's directive and his subsequent violent actions reveal a recognition of the pragmatic legitimacy of a performative of insurrection, not protest. The influence of the Big Lie is evident in the perlocutionary effects manifest in the rioters' actions, like those of Huttle and Cordon.

Although Trump forbade photographic or diary documentation of his actions for 187 minutes, he did watch the attack on television. During that time, White House staff and others encouraged him to intervene. He refused. However, he was not idle. At 2:24 p.m., the President tweeted about the VPOTUS' decision to certify the count:

Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands truth! (Select 2022, 86)

Immediately after this tweet, “the crowds both inside and outside of the Capitol building violently surged forward” (ibid), breaching the west side in ten minutes. The timing indicates Trump’s responsibility for this perlocutionary effect of insurrection, generated by his scapegoating of Mike Pence.

Trump eventually sent two more tweets telling supporters to “stay peaceful” and “remain peaceful” (Select 2022, 88). These are abuses of the sincerity condition. The crowd was not peaceful, so it could not “stay” or “remain” that way; the President and the rioters knew this, so it is not surprising that the tweets were ignored. Three hours into the attack, Trump continued his memory activism perpetuating the Big Lie in his video broadcast, as he told rioters to go home:

We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now [...] We love you. You’re very special. You’ve seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel, but go home, and go home in peace. (Trump 2021)

Finally, at 6:01 p.m., Trump posted his last tweet, justifying the violence. This time, he reinforces himself as a mnemonic agent of memory of activism, through his closing command: “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred election landslide victory is so unceremoniously and viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. *Remember this day forever!*” (Trump 2021, emphasis added).

8 Closing Thoughts

SAT offers a lens to probe the world-changing performative dimensions of language in relation to the memory-activism nexus. The preceding analysis articulates how memory is at work in activism at the level of language use, in the utterance itself of the locutionary act and the corresponding illocutionary act, as well as in their perlocutionary effects. This SAT lens is particularly useful for the analysis of the syntactic-semantic dimension of language as it directs attention to the cultural reservoirs of performative discourse routines housed in collective memory.

Locutionary acts are regularly at work in the memory-activism nexus, promoting certain memories, like the Big Lie, remembering earlier social movements, like the command to “remember this day,” and animating memory

in new acts of contention, like in the “Save America” speech and rally. The choice of genre for illocutionary acts reveals activists’ intentions while pulling them into the diachronic dynamics of their community’s collective memory, which includes established patterns of contentious language use. Because of deep discourse memory, activists recognise these language patterns and know whether they are felicitously performed or not. Trump’s performance of a protest speech misfires because as a sitting president he does not qualify as a protester and protest is not a deeply embedded, appropriate, presidential language routine. It also misfires when his intention manifests as insurrection.

Perlocutionary effects, such as that of insurrection, can be uptakes of immediate or delayed memory activism that promotes particular memories, even false ones. By motivating the perlocutionary effect of insurrection, the Big Lie enacts memory activism by influencing not only the moment of utterance but also the future. Because of his dishonesty, Trump’s protest performative abuses the sincerity condition of a protest act, squelching its felicity to the accepted discourse conventions of the genre. Nevertheless, this does not prevent it from persuading those who fail to recognise this dishonesty, including the millions of Americans who still believe the Big Lie.

Because Trump’s intention was to prevent certification by any means necessary, he is responsible for the perlocutionary effect of violence. The misfires and abuses of his performative utterance, his incitement of and refusal to denounce violence, as well as his followers’ use of it, demonstrate that an accurate future collective memory of this day’s activism is one of insurrection, not protest.

Trump’s insistence on calling his speech one of protest, along with his other unusual language use, is troublesome not only from the rarified position of discourse analysis, but also with respect to a more general concern with the practical unmooring of words from their meanings in daily life. Robert Morgan (2024) suggests that language change such as the use of familiar words in new ways is not generally harmful. However, when we have established words that describe particular phenomena, such as “woke” or “gaslighting,” whose meaning is rapidly and radically changing, it can create practical and ethical problems (Morgan 2024). This is true regarding the rapid and radical changing of discourse routines as well.

In a consideration of SAT and the memory-activism nexus, such problems include the undermining of civic discourse by destabilising the long-established work we do with words. Such destabilisation leads to community suspicion of the pragmatic legitimacy of speech acts, from christening to threatening, because we can no longer be sure we are communicating through

their utterance what we once remembered communicating through them. In such situations, the illocutionary choice of genre no longer indicates intention. Perlocutionary effects no longer result in the uptakes necessary to hold civic society together, whether it is the honouring of a promise, the sentencing of a criminal, or the protesting of an injustice. Historically, during wartime in particular, this unmooring of words from their meanings also contributes to the destabilising of societies, when binary strategies are deployed to scapegoat past neighbours into future enemies, to create peace through war, to burn the village to save it. Having become effervescent, we can no longer depend upon the work we do with words as they melt into the air, stripped of the power of intention, sincerity, and follow-through.

This stripping is dangerous for democratic societies, which hinge upon the rule of law, the rule of words, and the precedents established through those words, in order to function. It is unclear if Trump intentionally disregards traditional meanings underlying performative utterances or if he is intellectually unaware of basic pragmatic legitimacy patterns of situated language use. What is clear is that the perlocutionary effects of his speech acts undermine the reliability of the memory-activism nexus at the cornerstone level of language, by convincing us not to trust our own senses, what we hear with our own ears and read with our own eyes. This is dangerous for democracy, which requires understanding and trust in our language, our memory, and in each other, for its flourishing.

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PART 2
Word Work



Reading ‘Compañero/a/x’ as a Contentious Keyword in Chile: A Bakhtinian Perspective

Nicolás Villarroel and Vic Riveros

*“Compañero. A Word for which there is no adequate English equivalent, because soul mate, buddy, friend, comrade, even companion, do not contain, like an echo, the Spanish word for bread – pan– and it is that pan which speaks most profoundly in *compañero* of two people who break bread, of that other who is a brother even if you have never met him, of that trust.” (Dorfman 1998)*

1 Introduction

Keywords associated with political and ideological traditions do not exist in a social vacuum, and their meaning is not necessarily the one that appears in dictionaries (Williams 2015 [1976]). Words, meaning, and sociohistorical context are inseparably interrelated as well as entangled in the historical trajectories of social groups (Tarrow 2013). This is the starting point of this chapter, and it implies that the keywords of activism cannot be taken in their linguistic-semantic dimension only but need to be considered in their contact with social life. Accordingly, we are interested here not only in words per se but in how words become ideological signs (Vološinov 1973 [1929]) that can potentially become generic or stable forms of speech (Bakhtin 1986 [1953]) within specific socio-ideological frameworks. In this process, keywords condense groups’ ideological and historical trajectories and refract broader contexts of relationships, political beliefs, and histories of struggle. To put it differently, contentious keywords speak to the collective memory of social groups and their shared frameworks of social thought (Halbwachs 1992 [1925]). However, as social thought is not fixed but evolving, keywords that are meaningful in a particular context can become meaningless, when they lose the meaning they once had for specific groups or traditions. A site of the imbrication between remembering and forgetting within activism, contentious keywords may lose their connection with particular traditions, and much of their meaning in the process (Erl 2011a).

Against the background of these considerations, this chapter focuses on the word ‘compañero’ (male) or ‘compañera’ (female)¹ in the context of the Chilean political left. This keyword is not exclusive to the Chilean or Spanish-speaking context, and its use resembles that of the English ‘comrade,’ whose use in communist and broader left-wing circles has been studied by Jodi Dean (2019). Dean argues that comrade indicates a specific political relationship of sameness, equality, and solidarity, and that it involves a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion since anyone, but not everyone can be a comrade. Furthermore, this type of relationship is at the core of an anti-capitalist project to which all comrades contribute to under equal conditions, as comrades have expectations and demand discipline from each other. As Dean (2019) explains, comrade derives from ‘camera,’ the Latin word for a room, a chamber, and a vault. This means that comrade and related terms like camaraderie and comradeship designate a particular relationship of closeness between two (or more) people sharing a space. This relationship is characterised by “an intensity of feeling and expectation of solidarity that differentiates those on one side from those on the other [...] comradeship is a political relation of supported cover” (Dean 2019, 9–10). Comrades are those on the same side of the struggle against capitalism, who share an ideological horizon of another life without class structure, exploitation, and injustice. Comradeship thus assumes a division, an ‘us’ and ‘them’ that differs from the division between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ since those who are not now on the same side “might later come to be [...] comrade[s]” (Dean 2019, 61).

As we will see, the Spanish term *compañero* works in a similar way to the English term *comrade*. *Comrade*’s exact translation in Spanish is ‘*camarada*,’ sharing the same etymology. However, ‘*compañero*’ bears a different emphasis in the Chilean left-wing context. The word ‘*compañero*’ comes from ‘*compaña*,’ which derives from ‘*panis*’ or ‘*pan*,’ i.e., the word for bread, and refers to “eating from the same bread” (Corominas 1987, 162). Both ‘*compañero*’ and ‘*camarada*’ emphasise a togetherness that is accompanied by intimacy, creating a division that can be understood with the concept of ‘convocativity’: “a moment of scattered direct address, a vocative through which addressees interpellate themselves into Us or Them” (Hill 2018, 62; see also Hill in this volume). While *comrade* or *camarada* emphasise sharing a space, ‘*compañero*’ emphasises a shared action, a goal and a common fate (Real Academia Española n.d.). Aside from these linguistic differences, the Chilean left mostly uses *compañero/a* rather than *camarada*.

In line with these etymological studies, our argument in this chapter is that *compañero/a* speaks of a relationship between people and, more importantly,

1 We will not translate the word *compañero* or *compañera* (*compañero/a*) throughout the chapter but keep it in Spanish when analysing the different material.

determines an active response from the one addressed as such. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986 [1953]) theory of 'speech genres,' we argue that within the social frameworks of the Chilean left wing, *compañero/a* is not a mere word but constitutes a "relatively stable utterance" that shapes the positions of, and relationships between speakers. As such, the meaning of *compañero/a* is inextricably linked to the collective memory of social groups. In the following section, we present our conceptual framework, focusing on the dialogical theories of Valentin Vološinov and Mikhail Bakhtin. After a brief outline of the historical context, the chapter proceeds to illustrate the shifting uses to which *compañero* has been put in the Chilean context. Our examples demonstrate how this term still carries ideological and political significance in post-dictatorial Chile, while also showing how its meaning changes across different contexts in diverse social struggles. We conclude the chapter with a reflection on language and memory, and on how the changes in *compañero/a/x* make room for new positions in current political struggles.

2 Words, Ideology and Speech Genres

We address the relationship between language and ideology from the viewpoint of dialogism, as developed by Vološinov (1973 [1929]) and Bakhtin (1981 [1935]; 1986 [1953])². This approach provides a rich framework from which to analyse how signs in general, and words in particular, are interrelated with culture and social life. Furthermore, these theories provide anchoring points to think about the relationship between language and collective memory, as the meaning of words cannot be separated from the social frameworks that constitute the cultural and ideological fabric of groups in society (Halbwachs 1992

2 Some scholars, such as Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, argue that the works signed by Valentin Vološinov and Pavel Medvedev (whose work we are not including here) were largely written by Mikhail Bakhtin. This was first suggested in 1971 and sparked a debate in which scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov, Gary Morson, Caryl Emerson, among others, have taken part (Morris 1994). What is certain is that the three authors collaborated as part of the same intellectual circle. Although this debate will never be fully settled, we are partial to the idea that attributing their work to only one authorial voice would be contrary to the spirit of the theories they proposed: authorship is about the relation with other positions and with people's voices, which is not a monological, but a dialogical and collaborative process. Finally, we believe that each text from these authors reflect on different aspects of their shared concerns about discourse, ideology, creativity, among many others. Hence, we distinguish between the authors in the works we cite, acknowledging that they were likely commenting and debating their ideas, with their authorship tracing genealogical connections that shed light to different dimensions of a shared onto-epistemological position.

[1925]). Said social frameworks, Maurice Halbwachs points out (1992), enable processes of remembering, making language fundamental for memory.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Vološinov (1973) situates the problem of language within the general area of ideology and signs. He explains that the main characteristic of ideological products is that they have meaning as they stand for something else, “lying outside of [themselves]” (Vološinov 1973, 9). As signs, ideological products are directed, and direct us, towards a sociohistorical reality. More specifically, signs have meaning because they have their genesis in the interaction between people who are socially organised or are part of a group or class. Hence, signs are ideological in the sense that their meaning is shaped by the history and interactions between members of social groups with particular interests, concerns, and ways of living. Signs, and especially words, then, materialise the communication within and between social groups and cannot be separated from this context. Vološinov (1973, 13–14) concludes that “the word is the ideological phenomenon *par excellence*. The entire reality of the word is wholly absorbed in its function of being a sign.” At the same time, Vološinov argues that a word can have multiple meanings in different contexts, as “the totality of users of the same set of signs” is broader than a specific class or group; thus, “differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign[s] become an arena of the class struggle” (1973, 23). Words are multi-accented, they accumulate the memory of having been used by diverse voices with different, and sometimes clashing worldviews. One implication of this argument is that the meaning of words is continually subject to debate. Consequently, no language is uniform or coherent, rather, it is continuously reshaped by social life’s rhythms, flows, and contradictions (Sućeska 2018). This quality of language makes words ‘alive,’ Vološinov (1973) explains, in the sense of being open to dynamics of stability and transformation.

Vološinov’s argument is complemented by Bakhtin’s theorisation of ‘speech genres.’ This theory is helpful for understanding how cultural memory comes into play in the utterance of *compañero* in different contexts, and we will now turn to it in some detail. Like Vološinov, Bakhtin (1981) argues that utterances are never spoken in solitude but engage in dialogical relations with other utterances. In this tension with the words of others, utterances take shape and acquire a particular style. In what follows, we limit our discussion of Bakhtin to his account of how utterances become stable over time. If utterances are not autonomous but are entangled in socio-ideological processes, then how is it that particular words or phrases, like *comrade* or *compañero/a*, acquire a stable meaning for a group?

Bakhtin (1986) addresses this issue in “The Problem of Speech Genres,” where he explains that the content, style and structure of utterances is determined by the context in which the communication takes place. Even though each utterance is individual, “each sphere in which language is used develops

its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*" (Bakhtin 1986, 60; italics in the original). Consequently, the challenge is in understanding how particular utterances become relatively stable. To achieve this, we must attend not just to words or sentences themselves, but to the contexts of interaction in which speakers articulate and interpret their utterances. This context is not just the immediate communicative situation but also encompasses extraverbal dimensions of discourse (Vološinov 1976 [1926]), including the broader sociohistorical processes in which speakers participate, previous interactions with other people, and previous utterances to which current ones respond (Bakhtin 1986). This broader context shapes the typical themes and forms of communication, as well as the stable meaning of words in specific circumstances. Even though a speaker may have a specific plan or intention, the choice of a speech genre already shapes the utterance's style and structure (Bakhtin 1986). Moreover, when articulating an utterance we are not only shaping our position as speakers, but we are also anticipating and determining how (imagined) others may respond.

Particularly important for our case, Bakhtin (1986) argues that a single word can constitute a speech genre. Under particular sociopolitical conditions, words may acquire a "special weight" (Bakhtin 1986, 85) and give rise to an "active responsive position with respect to [these conditions] (sympathy, agreement or disagreement, stimulus to action)" (Bakhtin 1986, 86). As such, words acquire a typical expression that configures their meaning. Moreover, we speak, interpret, and assimilate the sense of words by considering the voices of other people with whom we share a sphere of social activity:

Our speech, that is, all our utterances [...], is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness" [...] These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate (Bakhtin 1986, 89).

Speakers do not have free reign in how they use words but assimilate them from others' speech, which they progressively rework and 'make their own.' Speakers' words and expressions echo the voices of others, but not in a mechanistic way; they are renewed in the process of assimilation, changing their meaning. This flexibility allows for creative reworking and re-accentuation, which opens the word to novelty while maintaining its relative stability and, hence, its link to memory.

Turning to our case, we argue that *compañero/a* has acquired a stable meaning among Chilean left-wingers; that is, it shapes the active responses of those who are addressed with this term because of an ideological resonance that can be traced to forms of social communication among the working class and

revolutionary movements (Dean 2019). *Compañero's* meaning does not reside only in its etymology but in a way of life, a sociality of being comrades on the same side of the struggle. On this point, the dialogical theories of Bakhtin and Vološinov resonate with the work of Halbwachs (1992) and illuminate the relationship between language and collective memory. Words like *compañero* weave speakers into a sphere of communication that is culturally and historically situated (Haye and Larraín 2018). The meaning of a word, derived from its social genesis, is able to configure the relationships between people because it is part of collective memory, inextricably linked with sociocultural frameworks and the voices of other speakers in the group. The stable sense of a word is only achieved against a background of past utterances and interpretations that reverberate in each new utterance. This means that new articulations of 'compañero' participate in dialogic relations with voices from the past, be that in the form of agreement, challenge, or satire, among other possibilities. These dialogical dynamics may contest or reinforce the stable meanings of *compañero* by adding new accents, shaping the life and trajectory of this word. As we will show throughout the chapter, historical scenarios shape how *compañero* is used and interpreted in different contexts. The next section of the chapter outlines the social and political landscape that frames our analysis. As this landscape changes and other forms of sociality emerge, new iterations may contest the voices of the past, and the meaning of *compañero* may shift.

3 Historical Context: Allende, the Dictatorship, and the Post-Dictatorship

On 4 September 1970, a politically unprecedented event took place when the socialist candidate of the left-wing coalition *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity), Salvador Allende became president of Chile. This was the first socialist government that had come to power through a democratic election rather than a revolution. His election marked the beginning of the '1,000 days' of Allende's government (Gaudichaud 2020), which aimed to build a socialist country without an armed revolution (Austin Henry et al. 2020). The three years of Allende's government were characterised by economic, social and cultural transformations, including the nationalisation of industries, the granting of free access to health and education, and the improvement of rural working conditions (Austin Henry et al. 2020). However, Allende's government found itself involved in multiple geopolitical and ideological disputes (Corvalán Márquez 2020). External influence from the USA, as well as internal instability, burdened the conditions of governability in Chile, with high political polarisation among the population and economic hardships (Corvalán Márquez 2020;

Kornbluh 2013). Despite these problems, Allende's government still had support from sectors of the population. After public calls for intervention from conservative sectors, on 11 September 1973, the army, the police, the navy, and the air force carried out a coup d'état, leading to the arrest – and in many cases murder – of government officials, leaders and members of left-wing political parties, as well as government sympathisers and bystanders. The air force bombed the governmental palace, and Allende died, inaugurating a right-wing dictatorship in which Augusto Pinochet, the army's general, stayed in power until 11 March 1990.

The civil-military dictatorship was characterised by structural transformations paving the way for neoliberalism and by the systematic violation of human rights. On the one hand, neoliberal policies diminished the State's role as a guarantor of social rights, with the education, pension, and health systems becoming privatised. Moreover, they led to a cultural transformation of values, emphasising individualism and consumption, which transformed Chilean social relations (Araujo 2019). On the other hand, the extensive violation of human rights systematically targeted left-wing parties, their leaders, and political dissidents in general.³ Official numbers recognise the execution of more than 3,200 people (National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation 1991) and the imprisonment and torture of more than 27,000 (Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture 2005). Additionally, many lost their jobs due to their political orientation, and there was a general climate of fear and threat (Lira and Castillo 1991). Given all these factors, thousands of Chileans forcibly migrated overseas and were exiled with their families, with estimations ranging from 400,000 to up to 1,000,000 people displaced (Cornejo 2008; Shayne 2009; Wright and Montupil 1995)

The dictatorship officially ended in 1990, inaugurating a period of transition to democracy which, however, left the dictatorship's structural changes in place. Post-dictatorship governments, aiming to ensure governability through political pragmatism, made concessions to the military by limiting the processes of justice and democracy – hence the idea of a 'Chilean way of political reconciliation' (Loveman and Lira 2007). In terms of political culture, the memory of the dictatorship has been characterised by active disputes marked by political and class antagonisms (Stern and Winn 2013; Waldman Mitnick 2009), as well as silences that are transmitted across new generations (Stern 2009). These silences have become especially visible in 'hijos literature,' i.e., the literature of the generation raised during or after the dictatorship (Fandiño 2016). Under the influence of neoliberalism (Araujo 2019), the discourse of

3 Nonetheless, repression was not limited only to these groups (see Jara et al. 2018).

reconciliation in the public sphere has been depoliticised to secure peaceful coexistence among Chileans (Reyes et al. 2013). The result has been the compartmentalisation of memory within closed left- and right-wing groups (Jara 2016) and a general distancing from the political project of the *Unidad Popular*.

The meaning of *compañero*, as a stabilised social relationship of being on the same side of a political struggle, has been contested and redefined as new actors emerged and disputed the public arena. We begin our analysis with Allende's speeches to show how he used *compañero* to differentiate diverse political actors. We also analyse how Allende positioned himself as the *compañero presidente*, a phrase that encapsulates the spirit of the *Unidad Popular* as a political project that was connected to the people.

4 Allende, el Compañero Presidente

In his speeches, Allende often used the word *compañeros* to address the Chilean people and representatives of left-wing political parties and workers' organisations. In 1971, at the Latin American Conference for the Agrarian Reform, Allende used the word *compañeros* five times to refer to different actors:⁴

Compañeros workers of the land who have come from all over Latin America and from socialist countries; *compañeros* leaders of the different Chilean peasant organisations; mister (señor) Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, head of the Chilean Church and good friend of the peasants; *compañeros* Ministers of Agriculture and Labour; *compañeros* agricultural leaders, representatives of the CUT,⁵ parliamentarians of the people and *compañeros* leaders of the popular parties.

[Compañeros trabajadores de la tierra que han venido desde toda Latinoamérica y desde países socialistas; *compañeros* dirigentes de las distintas organizaciones campesinas chilenas; señor cardenal Raúl Silva Henríquez, jefe de la Iglesia chilena y buen amigo de los campesinos; *compañeros* ministros de Agricultura y del Trabajo; *compañeros* dirigentes del agro, representantes de la CUT, parlamentarios del pueblo y *compañeros* dirigentes de los partidos populares.] (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile [BCN] 2020, 89)

4 In the following examples, we will include the translation of the fragments in English first and the Spanish original within brackets after.

5 The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile, the Workers' Central Union of Chile.

In this speech, we can see that the *compañeros* are the workers of the land, the leaders of the Chilean peasant organisations, the ministers of agriculture and labour, the agricultural leaders, and the leaders of the popular parties. Notably, the cardinal Silva Henríquez, the head of the Chilean church, is referred to as *señor*, and later as a friend of the peasants, but not as a *compañero*. Allende's addressing of the workers and the leaders of organisations and political parties as *compañeros* puts them all on the same side of the struggle and evokes the shared responsibility to work together to pave the road for socialism in Chile. By contrast, the relationship with the church is defined by another type of bond, friendship, which is not shaped by the same expectations.

The moniker *compañero*, then, could be used to stake out the positions of different actors in the political struggle. Allende also referred to himself as a *compañero*. In the first speech he gave after winning the election in 1970, after thanking the different parties and all his supporters, he used it to emphasise his commitment to the Chilean people:

The commitment that I make to my conscience and to the people – a fundamental actor in this victory – is to be authentically loyal in the great common and collective task. I have said it: my only desire is to be the *compañero presidente* for you.

[El compromiso que yo contraigo ante mi conciencia y ante el pueblo – actor fundamental de esta victoria – es ser auténticamente leal en la gran tarea común y colectiva. Lo he dicho: mi único anhelo es ser para ustedes el *compañero presidente*.]

(BCN 2020, 29, italics added)

In this context, the expression '*compañero presidente*' positions Allende not only as the president but as a *compañero* in the larger collective task of building a socialist country. It acquires a particular weight, as it signals both a political commitment to the Chilean people and a collaboration among equals in the struggle against capitalism. Allende concluded his speech with the remark: "To your loyalty, I will answer with the loyalty of a ruler of the people; with the loyalty of the *compañero presidente*" [A la lealtad de ustedes, responderé con la lealtad de un gobernante del pueblo; con la lealtad del *compañero presidente*] (BCN 2020, 34). Here, his positioning is even more explicit, as a ruler of the people who is on their side, working towards a shared ideological horizon (see also Grimmer in this volume about 'el pueblo' and the *Unidad Popular*).

Dean (2019) argues, as we have seen, that being comrades (as opposed to being friends or colleagues) involves being part of the same struggle and

sharing the responsibility of working towards a common goal. Seen in this light, it is striking how Allende repeatedly addressed the workers as *compañeros* in his speeches. For example, in the Worker's Day commemoration on May 1, 1971, he used the term *compañero* 24 times and the term *camarada* only five times. He did so to refer to particular people, including Víctor Díaz (a member of the Communist Party who was arrested and disappeared during the dictatorship) and Volodia Teitelboim (a member of the Communist Party who became an exile in Moscow). Allende mostly used *compañeros* to demand more discipline from workers, emphasising the relevance of production and the importance of the workers in fulfilling the governmental program of the *Unidad Popular*. On this occasion, Allende spoke from a position of authority, criticising the workers for falsifying medical absences and being disloyal to the government. This position of authority does not deny their comradeship: even though Allende spoke as the workers' president, he also reminded them that being *compañeros* entailed a committed relationship to the *Unidad Popular's* project. As he was concluding his speech, he appealed to the workers and entrusted them with responsibility while positioning himself as the *compañero* presidente:

I call you with passion, I call you with affection, I call you like an older brother to understand our responsibility; I speak to you as the *compañero* presidente to defend the future of Chile, which is in your hands, workers of my homeland.

[Yo los llamo con pasión, los llamo con cariño, los llamo como un hermano mayor a entender nuestra responsabilidad; les hablo como el *compañero* presidente para defender el futuro de Chile, que está en manos de ustedes, trabajadores de mi patria.] (BCN 2020, 122–123)

In this speech, the articulation of Allende's position as the *compañero* presidente comes after addressing and reprimanding the workers, reminding them of their responsibility for Chile's future. Using the keyword *compañero*, he sets expectations and determines the position of the workers, stressing that their responsibility to achieve socialism is as crucial as his own. Even though he is speaking from a position of authority, he also positions himself as an older brother who is affectionate towards his *compañeros*.

Allende used 'compañero' in most of his speeches, even when he addressed the Chilean people in his final hours during the coup d'état, which indicates the significance of that word in the context of his government. However, not everyone is a *compañero*: *compañeros* are the ones who are equals, and directly responsible for working towards the achievement of socialism – the members

of left-wing political parties, peasant leaders, workers, and the Chilean people as a generalised addressee, cast as a fundamental actor responsible for the collective task of building a socialist country.

5 What Compañero?

The post-dictatorial years in Chile present a radically different context. Despite intense student demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 demanding free public education, for many young Chileans *compañero* lacks the ideological resonance with the memory of Allende and the Chilean left, with this resonance largely lost thanks to pervasive neoliberalism. The second author experienced this in Santiago in 2013, when they were participating in a social program in 'vulnerable neighbourhoods,' working with groups of teenagers. In that context, they organised an activity to get to know the participants with a game designed in the 1980s by the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación [CIDE, Centre for Research and Development in Education].⁶ The activity was straightforward: the teenagers had to throw a dice, land on a spot on the board and randomly pick a card with a phrase to discuss with the rest of the group. Some cards contained polemic statements, including issues related to drug use, conflicts, and life ambitions. One card included the word *compañero*, which the organiser considered a contentious and political keyword. The organiser's frame of reference responds to their experience as a 'child of the transition;' they were born in the last year of the dictatorship and raised around discussions about the transition, Pinochet and Allende. However, *compañero* did not generate the same reaction among the teenagers:

The teen reads the card, nervously ponders a second, and then says – "compañero? Compañero de curso?" (classmate) The other teens chime in – schoolmate? Bench mate? They are all a bit confused about what the card is asking from them. They are not sure why it is even asking them about the word, as it does not make sense to them (author's fieldnotes).

The teenagers quickly moved on to other phrases in the game, which prompted intense discussions about families, schoolwork, and other issues in which they were involved. It was evident that the word *compañero* did not prompt any

⁶ CIDE was founded in 1965 and developed diverse materials focused on popular and participatory approaches to learning and education, with an explicitly political commitment (Neut-Aguayo 2018).

ideological reaction among the participants because it did not resonate with any meaningful context or touch on any of their life concerns. Other statements in the game did, but not *compañero*. With Vološinov (1973) and Bakhtin (1986), we can see that the word *compañero* resonated with the organiser's spheres of social communication and their awareness of the political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. For them, *compañero* was a politically and historically charged word, as it was anchored in the collective memory of the dictatorship maintained through social movements. For the teenagers, by contrast, the word did not evoke any meaningful context, and they were confused as to whether they had to contextualise it with school or some other sphere of activity.

We might interpret this response with reference to the types of forgetting described by Paul Connerton (2008). As explained above, the post-dictatorial years were defined by the 'Chilean way of political reconciliation' (Loveman and Lira 2007), which combined remembering and forgetting. While some victims were recognised in the reports of the State's commissions in 1990 and 2003, there was also an insistence on behalf of the Chilean State on reconciliation, which resonates with Connerton's (2008) analysis of prescriptive forgetting. As he explains, prescriptive forgetting is a strategy fostered by states, especially after civil conflicts, when remembering might compromise governability and the possibility of achieving some degree of social peace. In other words, groups and individuals are urged to forget in order to maintain social cohesion. In the Chilean context, the political meaning of *compañero* became problematic, as its meaning involves a particular form of socialisation, i.e., a way of being with others as fellow comrades in the struggle for an alternative sociopolitical project. An unmistakably political word, it projects a division between 'us' and 'them,' of political adversaries in the best scenario and of enemies in the worst (Mouffe 2013). We might interpret the teenagers' lack of reaction as an effect of prescriptive forgetting fostered by the reconciliation discourse. Furthermore, the post-dictatorial years have been defined by the reaffirmation of neoliberalism and consumption (Araujo 2019). This form of capitalism is characterised by an accelerated experience of time, which pushes people to live in the present. The present breaks away from the past's continuous influx, as "the impatient tempo is irresistibly drawn to temporal boundaries, to beginnings and endings, comings and goings" (Connerton 2009, 61). This temporality of immediacy compounds prescriptive forgetting, resulting in a detachment between the present and the past, or between the younger generations and the history of struggle condensed in *compañero*. In disconnecting from left-wing sociopolitical frameworks, the political sense

of *compañero* is forgotten. The only thing preserved is its abstract apolitical meaning, experienced as atemporal and decontextualised knowledge 'that has always been.' As Astrid Erll's (2011b) notion of semantic memory suggests, what is forgotten is not just the context, but also the meaning that carries the memories of a group.

This example shows that in post-dictatorial neoliberal Chile, the conditions for the continuity of social frameworks (Halbwachs 1992) are not met. The demands to forget, as well as the temporalities of immediacy, weaken the connections between the present and contentious histories of past activism. However, in the face of attempts at prescriptive forgetting, utterances may still activate ideological responses when they resonate with the words of others, or with the collective memory of specific groups.

6 Learning to Say *Compañero* in Exile

Compañero can become a site not just of memory, but of resurrection, as new generations familiarise themselves, sometimes in embodied ways, with the social relationships the word historically indicated. Our third vignette comes from the first author's fieldwork during his doctoral research on the memory of the dictatorship with Chilean exiles in Australia. For context, more than 20,000 Chileans migrated to Australia during the years of the dictatorship (Kuhnel et al. 2019; Martín Montenegro 2004), and many stayed after the restoration of democracy. The context of exile produced an estrangement from everyday Chilean language and political culture, making familiarity with Chilean social and political left-wing frameworks not a given within this community. In 2020, the first author conducted individual interviews with participants from the first and second generations of exile, including dyads of parents and their children. One dyad involved a father who belonged to the Communist Party of Chile and his daughter, who was born in the late 1970s and grew up in Australia. At the moment of the interview, she was not involved in any political party. This vignette only focuses on the interview with the daughter, as it illustrates the role of the word *compañero* in her socialisation.

During the interview, the participant talked about how she learned about the dictatorship and the political exile of Chileans when growing up in Australia. She remembered attending, as a child, the solidarity protests to demand the end of the dictatorship. She also remembered other instances of socialisation, such as attending meetings with her father, and events organised by the Chilean community. In a revealing memory, she recalled how she

started to ask her father questions and how she began to identify the word *compañero*:

Then I started to realise and ask or listen, and I listened to my dad. When he referred to another person, he said *compañero*, *compañera*, and I wondered why he referred to other people as *mate* (*compadre*) or friend (*amigo*), but this one is *compañero*.

[Ahí empecé a darme cuenta y hacer preguntas y o escuchar, y escuchaba a mi papá. Cuando él le decía a otra persona le hablaba *compañero*, *compañera* y yo ‘por qué algunas les dice *compadre* o *amigo* nomás, pero este es *compañero*.’] (Interview, 20 August 2020)

These initial distinctions illustrate how the daughter started to distinguish the word *compañero* as a sign that her father used to differentiate between people. Not everyone is a *compañero*, so her father did not address everyone with that term. As she became more familiar with Chilean left-wing culture, she grasped the term's meaning. She explained that once she had assimilated the word, she started to use it in a playful way with her friends, the ‘children of the *compañeros*,’ imitating the interactions they heard in political meetings:

With friends that were the children of the *compañeros*. We would joke sometimes, and one time, to get the adults’ attention, a friend and I started (imitating the tone of the adults), ‘But let me talk, *compañera*, let me talk!’ (laughter) [...] ‘But *compañero*, no, let me, I was talking, *compañero*!’ (laughter) Because that’s how meetings were, ‘But *compañero*, with all due respect’ (laughter).

[Con puras amigas y amigos nomás de los hijos de los *compañeros*. Nosotros echábamos tallas, a veces, una vez para que nos escucharan los grandes, yo con mi amiga empezamos, (entonando la voz de los adultos) ‘pero déjame hablar, *compañera*, déjame hablar’ (ríen) [...] ‘Pero *compañero*, no, déjame, yo estaba hablando, pero *compañero*’ (ríe). Porque así eran las reuniones, ‘Pero *compañero*, con todo respeto’ (risas).] (Interview, 20 August 2020)

This last quote illustrates how the word *compañero* could be understood once the daughter became familiar with the frameworks of the Chilean left-wing culture, through listening to adults at political meetings. *Compañero*’s meaning is shaped by the recollections of these moments, as well as of her father’s and his *compañeros*’ voices. As such, she uses the word to refer to herself and

her friends as 'the children of the *compañeros*,' which reflects an understanding that *compañero* connotes a specific way of structuring social relationships. Her style and tone playfully imitating the adults resonate with the argument made by Bakhtin (1986) that our words carry, in varying degrees, the voices of others and their expressions. The daughter and her friends transform the word when they assimilate it, taking out some of its seriousness in the context of playing. By play-acting and mimicking, the children become the *compañeros* having a serious political meeting, while the adults become listeners to their interaction. Thus, *compañero* is recontextualised in the children's game and acquires playful, comical tones and a new accent while maintaining its stable meaning and expression. The voices and laughter of children rework *compañero* as a playful utterance, a laughing matter among them. This example demonstrates how assimilating the alien word, and consequently, the process of intergenerational transmission in general, is not a mechanical reproduction or a mere repetition but involves the creative re-evaluation and re-accentuation by the younger generations (Achugar 2016).

7 Reaccentuations: *Compañeras* and *Compañerxs*

Among activist communities in Chile, the political meaning of *compañero* has been maintained. However, speakers are also shifting the word's conventional mode of address and focusing attention on new communities by changing its inflexion and orthography, adding new accents within the changing political landscape of Chilean society. Allende's use of the term was highly masculine.⁷ A simple search in one compilation of his speeches reveals he used the term *compañero(s)* 122 times. In contrast, he only used *compañera(s)* 13 times, and the gender-neutral *camarada(s)* 11 times (BCN, 2020). As such, we find it revealing that current feminist organisations explicitly address their readers as *compañeras*, which could be interpreted as a contestation of the masculine, traditional address of *compañeros* among left-wingers. For example, one cover of the feminist publication *La Primera* reads: "Not one step back. Unanswered emergencies and an increasing crisis. This 8M, to the streets *compañeras*!" [Ni un paso atrás. Urgencias sin respuesta y una crisis que aumenta. ¡Este 8M, a las calles *compañeras*!] (Coordinadora Feminista 8M 2023). In other volumes of *La Primera*, the addressees are the *compañeras* and the queer community [disidencias sexuales], rather than *compañeros* (see also Valenzuela Tapia 2017 for feminist voices critically analysing left-wing men, i.e., *compañeros*,

⁷ He mostly used the masculine (*compañero*) in his speeches, which has come under feminist critique (Hiner 2009; Tapia 2020).

who reproduce patriarchal violence). Therefore, *compañera* is not identical to the masculine *compañero* but a feminist reaccentuation which responds to patriarchal violence and its institutions. Feminists note that not every woman is a *compañera*, as exemplified in Javiera Tapia's (2020) analysis of the slogan "A policewoman (*paca*) is not a *compañera*" [*la paca no es compañera*]. As Tapia (2020, para. 17) suggests, the term *compañera* invokes a way of living: "a reality that unites us as women, as trans, transvestites, homosexuals, in precariousness or as bodies more exposed to being repositories of *violencia machista*" [*una realidad que nos une en tanto mujeres, en tanto que trans, travestis, homosexuales, en la precariedad o en ser cuerpos más expuestos a ser depositarios de la violencia machista*]. In this context of patriarchal violence, the term *compañera* acquires political weight, both as an arena of encounter between diverse feminist positions and as an alternative political project to abolish patriarchal institutions, such as the police: "Beyond the individualities of the policewomen, the problem is the patriarchal institution without any intention to transform itself. It is capitalist, misogynistic, racist, and it should be dissolved" [*Más allá de las individualidades de las carabineras, el problema es la institución patriarcal, sin ninguna intencionalidad de transformarse. Es capitalista, misógina, racista y debiera ser disuelta*] (Tapia 2020, para. 18).

We also find a different reaccentuation on the part of Chilean anarchists and other political groups, who opt for neologistic, gender-neutral forms such as *compañerxs*. Anarchist activist Gabriela Curilem adopted this phrasing in the testimony she wrote while living in hiding, having been wrongly accused in what was known as the "Bombs Case" [*Caso Bombas*] in 2010.⁸ In it, she reaffirmed her struggle and asserted that she and her *compañerxs* were not defeated, even if they were imprisoned:

[T]he only defeat would be to deny who I am, my *compañerxs* and everything we built in these years. And that will never happen. I do not regret anything, the person I decided to be, nor the *compañerxs* I chose for life (and death).

[[L]a única derrota sería renegar de quien soy, de mis *compañerxs* y de todo lo que construimos en estos años. Y eso jamás ocurrirá. Yo no me

8 This case acquired lots of media attention as 14 anarchists were accused of terrorist illicit association. However, most of the evidence, witnesses and experts were dismissed and rejected by the judge, which has led to interpreting the *Caso Bombas* as a strategic move to criminalise anarchist collectives (Tamayo Grez 2012). Curilem publicly appeared in court in 2012, where her case was dismissed and closed due to lack of antecedents (La Tercera 2012; for a contrasting version of this partial account of the official media, see *Material Anarquista* 2012).

arrepiento de nada, de la persona que decidí ser, ni de lxs compañerxs que elegí para la vida (y la muerte).] (*El Ciudadano* 2010, para. 23)

This use of the word *compañerx* is another form of reaccentuation, denying its traditionally masculine gender and including other comrades who are struggling for a different way of living and structuring social relations. It is in this sense that Gabriela Curilem called on her *compañerxs*. By invoking “life and death,” she projects the relationships with her *compañerxs* into the future, suggesting that they will last and survive life’s hardships and political persecution. This creates a layering of past, present and future that resonates with the previous utterances of *compañero/a/x* and its construction of an ‘us,’ including Allende’s discourses, representing a lifelong (and beyond) political commitment.

These different recuperations and novel accents suggest that *compañero/a/x* still works as a contentious keyword among Chilean activists, carrying memory beyond the traditional sphere of left-wing activism and enabling a dialogical dynamic of contestation. At the same time, however, the words *compañeras* and *compañerxs* have become signs that mark a distance from the patriarchal left-wing culture of the *compañeros*. Feminists and anarchists are not today’s *compañeros*, but posit different ideas and understandings of activism. Paraphrasing Erll (2011a), *compañero/a/x* can be thought of as a travelling keyword, an overdetermined word that allows for changes in memory as social groups change and new forms of activism emerge. As a keyword, it retains some stability that resonates with previous struggles, but also acquires new accents in its transformation among new generations of activists, becoming an arena of ideological dispute (Vološinov 1973).

8 Conclusion: Memory and the Future of a Contentious Keyword

In *Keywords* (2015), Raymond Williams suggests that the attempt to understand the keywords of contemporary struggles leads to the even greater challenge of making sense of social and historical changes. However, language is not a mere reflection of these changes, as “some important social and historical processes occur *within* language” (Williams 2015, XXXIII). Like Bakhtin, Williams argues that new interpretations and even novel ways of understanding social relationships can emerge in language. In this process, current and past meanings coexist through adaptation, extension, and transfer, making room for novelty and creativity. Our analysis in this chapter resonates with Williams’ arguments, as we exemplified how *compañero/a/x* works as a contentious

keyword among Chilean activists and people who are familiar with left-wing sociopolitical frameworks. As demonstrated, the meaning of *compañero/a/x* becomes a field of contested memory shaped by diverse relations of political belonging, spilling over the semantic field to configure identities and encompass meaning beyond dictionary definitions. Therefore, keywords like *compañero/a/x* condense and evoke chains of previous relations, overlaying past and present, making room for the coexistence of multiple meanings, and enabling dialogical relations that shape *compañero's* trajectory among Chilean speakers.

Our analysis in this chapter outlines part of *compañero's* historical and political trajectory. We first focused on Allende's speeches and his use of *compañero* to distinguish different actors in the political field. We analysed how he referred to himself as the 'compañero presidente' to position himself as a *compañero* alongside the people and other revolutionary comrades, whom he addressed as working as equals and sharing the responsibility of building a socialist country; in contrast, he referred to the cardinal of the Catholic church as a 'friend.' Our second vignette brought to light how, in the present day, *compañero* does not always resonate with its political or ideological meaning. In its more abstract sense, the word *compañero/a* also means 'mate,' and it can be used to refer to classmates (*compañeros de curso*), workmates (*compañeros de trabajo*), teammates (*compañeros de equipo*), and so on. In such cases, as our second vignette described, the term has no political weight but simply refers to people with whom we share an activity. We interpret this detachment from *compañero's* political meaning as a reflection of prescriptive forgetting (Connerton 2008), reinforced during the post-dictatorial years by the Chilean way of political reconciliation (Loveman and Lira 2007) and by the fast pace of neoliberal capitalism (Connerton 2009). However, forgetting does not always mean a word is dead, as older senses can be resurrected and enter into dialogical relations with the voices of the present. Our third example brings the word *compañero* into the entanglements it has with specific forms of social communication of Chilean left-wing culture in exile. As the interviewee noted, she came to grasp the meaning of *compañero* by listening to her father's interactions with other activists – which ultimately allowed her to understand its specific, historical meaning in organising the social world. This led to the creative assimilation of the word, which was later utilised to imitate the adults in playful interactions with the children of the *compañeros*. Finally, our last section explored how the word *compañero/a/x* acquires new meanings and accents in feminist and anarchist social movements, showing how it is still a living keyword that configures relationships between activists. We also analysed how these new accents contest the patriarchal tone prevalent among traditional

left-wing spheres, and how *compañero/a/x* is being reshaped and reworked vis-à-vis post-dictatorial forgetting.

As Halbwachs (1992) argued, words are accompanied by groups' recollections, but at the same time, the memory of groups can only be articulated in language. Considering this, language connects with social frameworks only as long as people are familiar with such spheres of social communication. If there is no connection with such communities, words lose their potential to condense a group's history and to meaningfully participate in the present. This does not mean that words die, but that part of the memory of groups is forgotten and that keywords may change their meaning. This might happen due to political processes of forgetting (Connerton 2008; Loveman and Lira 2007) or transformations in political horizons as groups change. A keyword, then, can be suppressed, played with, and challenged; all these processes can lead to its transformation or reappropriation. Halbwachs' (1992) considerations work well with Erll's (2011b) understanding of semantic memory. She proposes that collective-semantic memory is connected with processes of organisation and with the preservation of knowledge by a certain group or society. The meaning of a keyword is kept and reconstructed as the common knowledge of specific groups because of its value as an organising force. The preservation and transmission of meaning help produce those social relationships constitutive of the group's identity, which means that the semantic field also becomes a site of contestation. This analysis suggests, then, that semantic memories have a contextual dimension, and that, following Bakhtin (1986), they should also be considered in dialogical terms. The meaning of contentious keywords cannot be crystallised beyond the social frameworks that produce a sense of identity or an 'us;' hence, *compañero/a/x* connects with social memories, identities, and political repertoires, the ways of working and being together that shape activism.

Finally, tracing some of the historical and contextual uses of *compañero/a/x* allows for a more general understanding of the importance of keywords in activism. As signs, keywords enable dialogical relations with the voices of living and deceased activists. They do not necessarily have uniform, homogenous, or authoritative meanings dictated by movement leaders. Rather, as we have explained using *compañero/a/x*, keywords are shaped by multiple points of view, becoming a "vocabulary to use, to find our ways in, to change as we find it necessary [...] as we go on making our own language and history" (Williams 2015, xxxv–xxxvi). The examples we have analysed reflect some of those points of view and demonstrate how engaging in a dialogue with the voices that populate contentious keywords allows for the renewal of political struggles, the navigation of relationships, and the dislocation of the

present to imagine alternatives for the future. Keywords activate the memory of previous struggles, productively recreating new political dimensions while engaging with genealogies of meaning that lend historical weight to current social movements. Thus, the relationship between contentious keywords and the memory of past struggles shapes the political imagination of alternative futures, making room for new compañerxs to ‘find their ways’ in the struggle for a more just society.

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Reclaiming *el pueblo*: The Role of Memories of the *Unidad Popular* in Artistic Interventions during the Chilean Revolt, 2019/20

Hannah K. Grimmer

1 Introduction

“The walls are the printing house of the poor,” states the title of a publication by DUDO Ediciones from 2021. This book serves as a visual testimony to the social revolt in Chile in October 2019 and is the starting point for this chapter. The phrase places the book in a wider South American tradition as it references the slogan “The walls are the printing house of the people,” attributed to Rodolfo Walsh (1927–77), a writer and journalist who was disappeared during the last Argentine dictatorship. The book brings together 192 photographs of walls in the cities of Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción, and Talca from October 2019 until October 2021, demonstrating both the diversity of the uprising’s demands and the central role played by city walls in expressing them. These photographs reveal the significance of urban spaces as a means of expression. On the one hand, they show a considerable amount of graffiti that may be perceived as mere daubing but which, in its phrasing and appearance, reveals social dissatisfaction; on the other hand, they contain paste-ups by artists such as Rosita Beas, Paloma Rodríguez and Caiozzama. As this chapter will unpack, there was a symbiosis between the graffiti and visual art of 2019/20, particularly in their use of words and phrases, that influenced the expressive potential of both. Walls became a huge shared canvas, on which discontent, anger, fear, and common sense were expressed in new ways that were nevertheless rooted in the past.

The social revolt of 2019/20, also known as the awakening, uprising or insurrection, is an excellent case study for analysing the workings of the memory-activism nexus (Rigney 2021, 299). From its inception, protestors chanted: “It’s not 30 pesos, it’s 30 years.” Though it was prompted by a planned subway fare increase, from the first day, the protests were not just about money, but about memory as well: 30 years had passed since the end of the dictatorship that overthrew President Salvador Allende (1908–73) and his government coalition *Unidad Popular* (UP) [Popular Unity]. This slogan shows

that the demonstrations were a response to both economic measures and a long history of injustice and violence that had affected several generations. The people's demand was for a profound change in post-dictatorial politics.¹

The memory of Allende loomed large during the revolt. The democratically elected socialist, who only lasted around 1,000 days in office, has had a long-standing influence on the demands of the streets. Today, the context of historical transformations in which Allende governed is often reflected in the aspirations of contemporary social movements. That is one reason why Allende's image – along with several other figures such as Víctor Jara, Pedro Lemebel, Violeta Parra or Gladys Marín – persists in various forms of homage, including graffiti bearing slogans such as “Allende lives,” “Allende's dream lives” or “Allende is/resides within the people.”² In 2019, one often-heard cry was “It can be felt, it can be felt, Allende is present!”³ Slogans like these are not only invocations of Allende but also direct references to the protests that took place between 1970 and 1973, when the streets were filled with chants of “Allende, Allende, the people defend you!” or “Chicho, don't worry, the people are with you!”⁴ Allende, with his unmistakable black horn-rimmed glasses, also graces the cover of *The Walls Are the Printing House of the Poor*. Notably, the paste-up depicting him, titled “Allende Lives,” has reimagined him as a contemporary protestor. He holds a cooking pot in his hand, a typical symbol of protest in the Southern Cone, and at his feet lies the iconic *Negro Matapacos*, a black dog wearing a red bandana that became a central symbol of the 2019/20 protests.⁵

Two elements of Allende's legacy are recalled particularly prominently, which have everything to do with the relationship between language, art, and

1 I would like to thank Alexander Ulrich Thygesen, who commented on an early draft of this chapter. My special thanks go to Gloria Elgueta Pinto, whose comments and advice in countless conversations were central to the development of my thoughts for this chapter.

2 Phrases in graffiti like “Allende vive,” “El sueño de Allende vive” or “Allende vive en el pueblo” were already present directly after the end of the dictatorship in 1990. This phenomenon was evident again during the commemorative acts for the 50th anniversary of the coup d'état on 10 and 11 September 2023. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Spanish are my own.

3 “¡Se siente, se siente, Allende está presente!”

4 “¡Allende, Allende, el pueblo te defiende!” or “¡Chicho, tranquilo, el pueblo está contigo!” as documented for instance in Patricio Guzmán's documentaries *La batalla de Chile* (Guzmán 1979) and *Salvador Allende* (Guzmán 2004).

5 It is difficult to translate the name of the dog, even if *negro* means black and the real dog had black fur, it can also be a nickname. *Matapacos* is composed of *matar* [to kill] and *paco*, a colloquial term for the *Carabineros de Chile*, the military police. I am grateful to Leandro Cappelto for bringing this translation problem to my attention. The paste-up was made by Franco Flores (alias *impagano*) and is called “Allende vive.” It was realised twice on walls in Santiago in 2020.

activism. First is the nostalgia for a political programme that had offered hope for fundamental change. The fact that cultural production was considered as a relevant component of social transformation for Allende's governing coalition *Unidad Popular*, and financially supported as such, was also seen as exemplary and influenced contemporary cultural demands (López and Peris Blanes 2021, 11). Second, on murals and paintings often some of the specific aspirational phrases spoken by Allende in his last speech, which was broadcast on the radio from the Presidential Palace on the day of the coup are recalled, such as: "History is ours, and it is made by the people," (Allende Gossens 2020c, 515) and "Continue to know that, sooner rather than later, the great avenues will open again for the free man to pass through to build a better society" (Allende Gossens 2020c, 516).⁶

It is important to note that the memory of Allende cannot be taken for granted, as his figure has only recently reappeared prominently in memory narratives, with the 2019 revolt and, even stronger, with the 50th anniversary of the coup in 2023. When the military dictatorship ended in 1990, heterogeneous memories were repressed in service of an official hegemonic memory geared towards consensus (Richard 2002, 189). Official memory discourse was about the "recovery and normalization of a democratic order," which was supposed to make the "multiple fissures and dislocations of signs produced during the dictatorship" disappear (Richard 2004, 16). Consequently, the legacy of Allende was one of the "rebellious memories" that was targeted (López et al. 2020a, 31). In the end, these memories made their way back to the streets with a vengeance and their very mention functioned as a form of critique of the dominant order. Allende's ideas regarding social politics and what he called a "democratic socialist revolution" were present in the demands of 2019, alongside echoes of the *Unidad Popular* (Cabezas 2022, 128). The revolt may not even have taken place without the transgenerational memory of the 1960s and the years 1970–73. The re-politicisation of Allende was, however, strongly personalised and homogenised.⁷ In the process of transforming his person into an icon,

6 "La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos"; "Sigan ustedes sabiendo que, mucho más temprano que tarde, de nuevo, [se] abrirán las grandes alamedas por donde pase el hombre libre, para construir una sociedad mejor." It is important to note that the version I am quoting here, which is the one most widely used, contains a reflexive verb 'se abrirán' the subsequent addition of the pronoun was intentional, but it does depersonalise the sentence's message.

7 Already at the time of the student movement in 2011, the governing coalition *Concertación* was criticised for depoliticising *el pueblo* and for its rehabilitation of Allende only in terms of its musealisation (Winn 2020a, 36).

contemporary depictions often deviate significantly from his actual politics, as they leave out the important fact that he was part of larger transformations in “a revolution from below” (Winn 2020b, 576).

Against this background, this article presents two arguments. Firstly, it makes the case that city walls were transformed into canvases exhibiting the desire for change in 2019, becoming the main point of expression during this revolt while vividly showcasing the complexities of social dialogue. The public space in general was reclaimed as a forum for everyone, providing alternative ways to communicate, express disapproval and educate. As such, it became a central arena for debate as well as for suppression. While artists and activists articulated criticisms of the regime, those who opposed the social revolt resorted to censorship, repainting the walls in grey or white, and cross-fading light projections. Secondly, this article claims that the 2019/20 revolt used keywords from the UP era to demand the rebuilding of cultural traditions that were decimated during the civil-military dictatorship. Moreover, by reclaiming this language, artistic interventions shifted away from hegemonic narratives and established an alternative public memory culture in which the UP and its historical context took centre stage. Prominent among the keywords they used was *el pueblo* [the people],⁸ which not only serves as an umbrella term encapsulating cohesion, unity and solidarity but also strongly invokes Allende himself.

Without grasping this strong footing in memory, *el pueblo* may seem a problematically ambiguous word, especially given the nuanced layers of meaning it has in Spanish, which can be difficult to convey accurately in translation. From an analytical standpoint, the invocation of *el pueblo* can be considered part of left-wing identity politics as described by Lea Susemichel and Jens Kastner, as it is associated with integration rather than exclusivity and exclusion. It implies a new pattern of solidarity that is to be understood as a “‘solidarity against’, which is always ‘against a superior power (capital, patriarchy, white supremacy ...)’” (Susemichel and Kastner 2021, 46). Also, it may be added that

8 Translating the Spanish term *el pueblo* into English is a delicate task. The distinction between *el pueblo*, *las personas* and *la gente* also proves to be problematic. While the first could be translated as ‘people,’ the second as ‘persons’ and the third as ‘humans,’ this no longer works if the sentence is to be translated as “Gana la gente,” a phrase coined by Patricio Aylwin, the first president after the end of the dictatorship. As Rodrigo Karmy rightly pointed out, *el pueblo* no longer exists in the 1990s. Later, the term ‘citizenship’ would be added to refer to the civic mass that acts through state institutions (2023, 159–160). For a discussion on the problems of translating *el pueblo* to German, see Kastner (2022). For a discussion of the term ‘the people’ in the English and/or Francophone contexts, see Badiou; Bourdieu; Butler, et al. (2016).

el pueblo is not a pre-existing entity, but a contested category (Friz 2023, 57) that needs to be actively constructed and shaped. The concept is a *conditio sine qua non* of political-democratic discourse, even if it does not denote a definable reality (Friz 2023, 59). It has four different but interconnected referents which are important to keep in mind for the argument here: 1) individuals associated with the idea of a modern nation-state; 2) the general population or the common people; 3) small towns; and 4) indigenous peoples, also referred to as *los pueblos originarios* or *los pueblos indígenas* (Kastner 2022, 65–69). At its core, *el pueblo* has long been defined in opposition to what was considered the elite, the rich, the influential, and the ruling parties (Friz 2023, 61), which resulted in the concept's underlying dichotomies, such as: people/oligarchy, people/institution, people/consensus (Friz 2023, 78). Thus, in the Chilean context, *el pueblo* denotes the opposite of the elite who had been in power – if not since the country's independence in 1818, then at least since the end of the military dictatorship in 1990. The years between 1970 and 1973 were a brief moment of political representation for *el pueblo*. As this article shows, contemporary artists, putting the word's polysemy to their advantage, both use *el pueblo* to conjure memory, and use memory to transform the meaning of *el pueblo*. By engaging with the term in this manner, they fuel and consolidate social protests in the heat of battle.

In what follows I will elaborate on two cases, Delight Lab's projections and the wall newspaper *Mercvria*, which I consider outstanding examples of the artistic interventions that arose during the revolt from 2019/20. Works like Delight Lab and *Mercvria* evoke memories that have been dismissed for decades in sophisticated ways. The memory work carried out by these contemporary artists in the streets is crucial to expand the current discourses of remembrance, to highlight opposition to the legacy of the dictatorship and to formulate ideas of a (different) future. Before starting this analysis, however, a sense is needed of the intertwined histories of Allende's troubled presidency and the term *el pueblo*.

2 The Thousand Days of Salvador Allende – *el pueblo* and its Representation

Salvador Allende, a medical doctor, co-founder of the Socialist Party in 1933 and a member of parliament since 1937, had unsuccessfully run for the highest political office of the presidential democracy in 1952, 1958 and 1964. By the time he was finally elected president of Chile on 4 September 1970, the country was

deeply divided by the unequal distribution of wealth and use of natural resources. Besides land reform and nutritional programmes for children, Allende enacted major economic reforms, including the nationalisation of copper mining (*Unidad Popular* 1970). This change was followed by a period of great unrest in the streets, with violent clashes leading to political instability. The ideological struggles of those years are echoed in the fierce clashes during the 2019/20 revolt as well as in their representation in contemporary cultural memory.

The 1970s were a time of many important transformations, which are sometimes described as a “revolution from below” (Winn 2020b, 576). Allende’s ascent to power as well as his sweeping reforms, marked the onset of what some refer to as a “revolution from above” which complemented the grassroots movements. These movements were composed of diverse social and political actors, including the *pobladores* [shantytown dwellers], farmers and indigenous people, who transcended the confines of institutional norms. They pioneered novel modes of activism, exemplified by land and factory occupations [known as *tomas*] (Winn 2020b, 575–576), which reached their apogee during Allende’s term in office.

The UP sought to facilitate these grassroots initiatives, hoping to pave the so-called ‘third way’ to socialism by creating certain cultural and social conditions (López and Peris Blanes 2021, 6). Their cultural-political programme, supported by many artists and state institutions (Errázuriz and Leiva Quijada 2012, 13), aimed to guarantee access to cultural products and to support the development of a new culture (Anwandter 2022, 7). In doing so, it contributed to the meaning and central importance of *el pueblo* in later times, which is discussed in further detail below. One remarkable example of this ambition is the publishing house *Quimantú*. On 12 February 1971, the State of Chile acquired all the assets of *Editorial Zig-Zag* and around April 1971, *Sociedad Empresa Editora Quimantú Limitada* was formally established. The company was divided into seven sections, including an Editorial Division, a Journalistic Division (responsible for informative magazines), a Children’s and Educational Publications Division, a Commercial Division, a Finance Division, a Personnel and Administration Division, and a Technical Division that corresponded to the printing workshops. *Quimantú* books were distributed by unions and sold at kiosks at a price comparable to a pack of cigarettes to spread the values of the “the new man” (Anwandter 2022, 7).

Moreover, art was marked as a tool for emancipation and considered central to the structural transformation of social and political processes (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos 2021, 47). The walls were designated as a place where the otherwise unheard were given a voice (Bellange 1995, 121), as

the quote at the beginning of this article suggests. The UP government itself even considered self-taught collective brigades of muralists, who countered the propaganda of the bourgeois parties, a key cultural actor. Some of these brigades emerged directly from political parties, like the *Brigadas Ramona Parra* (BRP) which developed from the Communist Youth (Longoni 1999, 22). The brigades operated within an urban reality, producing images that projected and belonged to a city of the future; to another reality that was still to come (Longoni, Carvajal, and Vindel 2012, 233). Yet it was not only this committed art, as Nelly Richard (2013, 154) calls it, but a whole range of artists who supported the wider political project promoted by Allende. These included writers, painters, musicians – known as *Nueva Canción Chilena* – graphic designers, stage directors, and actors. Collaborative projects were common. In 1971, for instance, several artists, amongst whom José Balmes, Gracia Barrios, Guillermo Núñez and Jorge Barba, painted a mural named *Pintando con el pueblo* [Painting with the people] in front of the Presidential Palace. There were even two exhibition projects, *El pueblo tiene arte con Allende* [The people have art with Allende] (1970) and *El tren popular de la cultura* [The People's Train of Culture] (1971), that accompanied the political developments. The reality, however, turned out very different from these artistic hopes and visions. On 11 September 1973, the military initiated their coup with the bombing of the Presidential Palace and Allende died, declaring his loyalty to *el pueblo* (Allende Gossens 2020c, 515).⁹

In light of the aforementioned circumstances, *el pueblo* should not be seen solely in terms of the working classes, nor viewed as a term that emerged just during Allende's presidency. Rather, the concept expresses the combined struggle between revolutions coming from different directions (Winn 2020b, 580), and as such functioned as a powerful keyword for Allende and within the UP's rhetoric. In public speeches, Allende frequently referred to *el pueblo*. For instance, on 5 November 1970, the president declared that his triumph was owed to the Chilean *pueblo*, who had entered the Presidential Palace with him (Allende Gossens 2020a, 28). He continued by describing himself as a "comrade president" (Allende Gossens 2020a, 29). For the analysis of the meaning of the term *compañero* in Allende's speeches, see Villarroel and Riveros in this

9 The relevance of Allende's social politics and the historical experiences of the UP in contemporary Chile has been studied extensively. See, for example, the two volumes *La vía chilena al socialismo 50 años después. Tomo I. Historia* and *Tomo II. Historia*, edited by Austin Henry, Salém Vasconcelos, and Canibilo Ramírez, published in 2020 by CLASCO in Buenos Aires. Thus, the aim of this article is not to present a fundamentally new analysis of the term *el pueblo*, which would be pretentious, but to analyse its role as a mobiliser of memories in the artistic interventions displayed on the city's walls.

volume. During the inauguration of the government, he announced, “The people [*el pueblo*] said: ‘We will overcome’, and we have overcome” (Allende Gossens 2020b, 37). On 19 April 1973, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Socialist Party, he stated that popular power [*el poder popular*] should not be thought of as a parallel force to the government, but as a force within the government that represents the people. On this occasion, he defined the referent of *el pueblo* by explicitly mentioning several organisations, such as the workers’ organisation *Cordones Industriales* [industrial belts], Mothers’ Centres and Neighbourhood Councils (Allende Gossens 1973).¹⁰

A similar move to define the referent of *el pueblo* is seen in the photo reports and texts published by *Quimantú*, which articulated the term in connection to socialist values. This publication associated *el pueblo* with a certain nationalist and developmentalist discourse that linked territorial sovereignty to the value of labour and economic productivity, thus shaping the category of *el pueblo* during this period (Anwandter 2022, 9). The photo collection “Who is Chile? We, the Chileans”¹¹ presented a history of the country, its diverse landscape, its cultural achievements, its personalities from the arts, and its workers, and thematised the role of women and indigenous traditions. One aim was to ensure a media representation of the working class framed as the *sujetos populares* [popular subjects] that had not existed until then, and to show them as “symbols of the people [*pueblo*] and the nation [*nación*]” (Anwandter 2022, 10). Since the existence of popular representatives of *el pueblo* was already assumed in UP discourse, it was possible to go in search of these bodies and images that corresponded to this idea. This led to photographs of workers, often deprived of their individual identity, standing in as representatives of *el pueblo* (Anwandter 2022, 11).

3 Operation Clean-Up: the Erasure of *el pueblo* and the Creation of *chilenidad* during the Civil-Military Dictatorship

On 11 September 1973, the military bombed the Presidential Palace *La Moneda*, the president’s home and the radio stations loyal to the government. The dictatorship started by enforcing silence. In the following days, not only were the brigades’ murals erased as the walls were painted white or grey, but books,

10 The feminist critique within the left, which criticised the paradigm of masculinity that shaped the concept of revolution, should be considered here (Traverso 2021, 5).

11 Available at: <https://nosotrosloschilenos.cl/archivo/quien-es-chile/> (accessed 23 April 2024).

newspapers and paintings were burned while the urban space was rendered inhospitable. These procedures were called *Operación Limpieza* [Operation Clean-up] and were accompanied by the destruction of the nation's cultural network through expulsion, exile, torture, and murder (Errázuriz and Leiva Quijada 2012, 14). From September 1973 onwards, posters were labelled an attack on the new order and censorship was introduced, combined with various policies directed at 'cleansing' public space and discourse. The overarching aim was to restore a supposedly institutional order organised around patriotic symbols (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos 2021, 14–15). In resistance to the dictatorship, artistic collectives such as *Colectivo de Acciones de Arte* (CADA) emerged, which "no longer operate[d] in an available city, but in the city under siege, the city of the failure of the brigades project" (Longoni, Carvajal, and Vindel 2012, 233).¹² Additionally, the clandestine press made great efforts to counter censorship, especially when images were banned in newspapers and magazines in 1984.¹³

In order to promote unity and construct a new national identity, in contradistinction to the previous encompassing conceptualisation of *el pueblo*, a nationalist discourse was established in the dictatorship which promoted *chilenidad* [chileness] by a change of keywords (Errázuriz and Leiva Quijada 2012, 11). The whole shift was designed to erase the memory of the UP. To this end, the military actively intervened in language use, enforcing the replacement of not only *el pueblo* but also, for example, the word *obrero* [labourer/worker], with *trabajador manual* [manual worker]. They also banned the use of the word *compañero* [comrade/companion] (Heynowski and Scheumann 1974, 85), which was strongly linked to the UP experience and fulfilled certain political functions in this context (see also Villarroel and Riveros in this volume).

The end of the dictatorship and transition towards democracy in 1990 occurred under Pinochet's conditions and is also referred to as a "negotiated transition" (Passmore 2016, 174).¹⁴ No significant transformation within the political institutions took place in this period, given that former dictator Augusto Pinochet remained army chief and later lifetime senator, and the economic, political, and social systems changed only gradually. According to

12 Their interventions, informed by the ideas of Conceptualism, Fluxus and Performance Art, differed markedly from the aesthetic principles dominant during the Unidad Popular. As a result, they were not easily recognised or understood as acts of critique, which allowed them to effectively evade censorship.

13 Junta Militar Bando N°15, *Censura y Clausura de Medios de Prensa*. The only newspapers that were allowed to show images were *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera de La Hora*.

14 For that reason, it is also preferable to use the term 'post-dictatorship' instead of 'transition'.

sociologist Manuel Garretón, Chile is the only country proud of a transition to democracy in which the dictator implemented a constitution to maintain his power (2003, 227). Although the dictatorship appeared to end peacefully, Pinochet would have remained in his position regardless of the plebiscite's outcome if he had had the support of the other generals (Kornbluh 2023, 385–392, 402–403). The post-dictatorship, then, did not entail a return to the discourse of the UP. Instead, during the transition, the word *el pueblo* was replaced by the word *la gente*, meaning a plurality of persons. Translated into English, *gente* can also refer to ‘people,’ but it is devoid of political undertones or socioeconomic distinctions. This shift was evident in the campaign slogan of Patricio Aylwin, the first elected post-dictatorship president.¹⁵ Modern Chilean political institutions, then, were created at the expense of *el pueblo* (Friz 2023, 61). Since the aim of the military and their accomplices had been to erase all traces of the pre-dictatorship era, the work of remembrance that had to be done in the post-dictatorship period, and particularly during the 2019 revolt, was as difficult as it was important.

4 The 2019 Revolt – ‘We Call Ourselves the People Again’

When the revolt gripped the country on 18 October 2019, most public media, especially television stations, implicitly allied themselves with the government of then-president Sebastián Piñera (1949–2024) (Garcés Durán 2020, 27–28), a businessman and one of Chile’s richest people. They did not address the causes of the riots or the protestors’ grievances but only covered violence and looting. Consequently, community radios and social media became key sources of information (Garcés Durán 2020, 27–28). Additionally, the various artistic expressions on the city walls served as an important means of communication, expressing unity among dissidents as well as opposition to the monopolised media landscape.

The streets saw an outpouring of harsh criticism of the extreme social inequality that continues to mark Chile, the policies that disadvantage the majority of the population, and the lack of political representation for *el pueblo*. Much in line with Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani’s definition of social movements as “networks which may either include formal organizations or not” (2006, 25), there was no previously organised group leading the activities, nor any political leader or spokesperson. The first post-dictatorial generation was crucial in this movement, as members of this generation managed to actively transform public

15 “Gana la gente! – Aylwin Presidente” [The people win! – Aylwin President]

memory (Badilla Rajevic 2019b, 498). They created a sense of community that resembled that of before 1973 through neighbourhood meetings, *ollas comunes* [soup kitchens] and assemblies in which memories of resistance played an important role (Garcés Durán 2020, 29). In doing so, they strengthened the memory of the resistance movements against the dictatorship and the solidarity practices of the opposition (Badilla Rajevic 2019a, 730). Despite the lack of official spokespersonship, their activities made clear that what was at stake in the street protests of 2019 and 2020 was “a change in the collective narrative and, indirectly, of social relations in the present” (Rigney 2022, 10).

Restoring keywords from the past, like *el pueblo*, expressed a vision of society that had once existed in Chile, and functioned as a mobilising strategy in October 2019. Keying passers-by into the history of the UP, they conjured a “hopeful memory” (Richard 2019, 124), as Nelly Richard pointed out in reference to one of the documentaries of *Las Batallas de Chile* by Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán. With this sense of possibility in mind, it does not come as a surprise that Guzmán, in his last film *Mi país imaginario* [My imaginary country], says: “Young people come here [*Plaza Dignidad*] to transform this space into a theatre of the future” (2022). Both in Chile and beyond, it is the emotive memory of hope, as well as of loss and defeat in which “mourning is inseparable from hope” (Traverso 2021, 48), which motivates the construction of new visions of society.¹⁶

5 Delight Lab – New Representations of Past Discourses

Within this context, on 19 October 2019, the art and design collective Delight Lab, formed by the siblings Andrea and Octavio Gana, started their first projection on the façade of the high-rise building Torre Telefónica on the central square of the city, informally renamed *Plaza Dignidad*. Passers-by could read the word “Dignity” in giant letters. However abstract the concept may seem, dignity, or a dignified life, has been one of the main demands of the social

16 Notwithstanding its positive impression, it is worth noting that this social revolt came to a definitive end with the rejection of the new constitution in 2022. The new constitution was rejected in a plebiscite on 4 September 2022, whereupon a new constitution was written by a “group of experts”. This second new version was subject to a vote on 17 December 2023 and was also rejected. Thus, the 1980 Constitution remains in effect. Some scholars argue that the collapse of democracy in 1973 and the termination of the dictatorship in 1989/90 are regarded equally as failures (Marchant 2000, 213). In that sense, it is plausible to view 2022 as part of this continuum of setbacks and disappointments.

movements both in Chile and beyond.¹⁷ The next day Delight Lab repeated the same word, this time adding two exclamation marks. On the third day, Delight Lab projected “We are not at war, we are united.” This phrase was a direct response to socio-political events, and the combination of these two sentences mobilised different layers of memory. Shortly before, Piñera had declared he was at war against “a powerful, implacable enemy, who respects nothing and no one” (Piñera 2019), announced a state of emergency, sent the military into the streets and allowed the violent behaviour of the *Carabineros* to go unchecked, as documented in the OHCHR report (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019). This combination led Piñera to be compared to former dictator Pinochet who used the now well-known expression, “Gentlemen, we are at war” (Huneeus 2004, 227) to justify the brutality of his regime.¹⁸ The fact that then-president Piñera repeated a metaphor from Pinochet further angered the people on the streets, who sought to differentiate themselves from the government. Affirming and giving voice to this shared sentiment, Delight Lab responded to the president’s statement in the voice of *el pueblo* by declaring that they and the masses gathered in the streets and squares were not at war. They complemented this negation with a positive statement about unity and cohesion: “we are united.” The projection voiced the crucial point that the demonstrators, as different as their concerns were, had one thing in common: they were striving for social change.

Delight Lab further used several verbal and symbolic means, anchored in Chilean left-wing tradition, to visualise and represent this social unity. In this projection, cohesion was symbolised by the raised fist projected at the end of the sentence. This internationally known symbol, particularly associated with labour unions and black liberation movements (Davidson and Blair 2019), calls for solidarity in resisting unjust and oppressive conditions. Furthermore, the raised fist was a prominent feature in the murals by the *Brigadas Ramona Parra* from the 1960s and 70s and could be found in the urban sphere, including as part of the unofficial memorial site to the victims of the 2019 revolt located on a central avenue of Santiago in 2023. This raised fist reads “No one will be forgotten,” and it was often seen during protests and commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the coup coordinated by organisations made up of the victims’ families. By using

17 The phrase “Until dignity becomes a habit” was first proclaimed in Mexico by Estela Hernández in 2017, when the Mexican state asked the hñáhnú community for forgiveness. More recently, Francia Márquez, Colombia’s vice president, has used the phrase several times.

18 A common chant during the protests is: “Piñera, conchetumadre, asesino, igual que Pinochet.” [Piñera, motherfucker, murderer, just like Pinochet]. In addition, several paste-ups and stencils were placed around the capital, merging the two men’s faces or showing Piñera sitting on Pinochet’s lap.

the raised fist as an important symbol, *el pueblo* is directly linked to the struggle against the regime in the broadest sense: against oppression and discrimination, for unity and solidarity.

Other projections by Delight Lab alluded to the political reawakening of a sense of unity, such as “For a new country, Chile woke up” (25 October 2019).¹⁹ The second part of this phrase was present in all the protests and is linked to the politics of the post-dictatorship. It implies that the country has been asleep or even paralysed since the day of the coup in 1973, unable to fight for real democratisation. On 14 November 2019, the Lab projected “Let the people [*el pueblo*] define their future”²⁰ on the façade of the National Congress in Valparaíso, once the most important coastal city near the capital.

That very night, the Congress was to discuss the agreement to hold a referendum on a new constitution. Through their projection, Delight Lab revived the concept of *el pueblo* and through its historical reference, forged a link to a possible, different future. Several months later, during the pandemic lockdown, on 23 July 2020 Delight Lab once again projected *pueblo* on the façade of the Torre Telefónica, the hopeful short-hand reference now building on the unifying projections of the previous year.

In general terms, what Delight Lab projects is open-ended. Their work is collective but not anonymous, encouraging the public to continue thinking and inviting other artists to join in. They promote protest slogans which come from the streets and are meant to be completed there. It is not the artists themselves but the social movement that fuels these verbal and visual interventions in the urban space. Part of a generation that did not directly experience the *Unidad Popular* era, they engage in a reinterpretation of historical discourses and recycle terminology associated with the old left. They condense years of social and political struggle into concise messages that underscore the significance of words as “a ‘strategic’ memory of past emancipatory struggles, a future-oriented memory” (Traverso 2021, xiv). In this process, they reinvigorate the words they employ, such as *el pueblo*, by recontextualising and updating their significance. In 2019, this involved contrasting these terms with Piñera’s discourse of war while concurrently expressing hopes for a 21st-century future. Moreover, they reestablish a connection to an alternative national identity by treating *el pueblo* as synonymous with Chile as a whole, rather than limiting its connotations to a *Chilenidad* influenced

19 Delight Lab projected onto the Torre Telefónica every day from 19 to 25 October 2019. The other sentences were: “Where is the reason?” (22 October), “Let their faces cover the horizon. Romario Veloz, Alex Núñez, Kevin Gómez, Manuel Rebolledo, José M. Uribe” (23 October) and “What do you understand by democracy?” (24 October).

20 “Qué el pueblo defina su future.”



FIGURE 6.1 Delight Lab, QUE EL PUEBLO DEFINA SU FUTURO, Facade of the National Congress, Valparaíso, Chile, 14 November 2019
 COPYRIGHTS: DELIGHT LAB. THE PROJECTION IS ON THE NATIONAL CONGRESS BUILDING IN THE CITY OF VALPARAÍSO. THAT SAME NIGHT, THE CONGRESS APPROVED THE “ACUERDO POR LA PAZ SOCIAL Y LA NUEVA CONSTITUCIÓN” [AGREEMENT FOR SOCIAL PEACE AND THE NEW CONSTITUTION], WHICH WAS SIGNED ON 15 NOVEMBER 2019

by the dictatorship. They also responded to the creation of new genealogies in the street. Their work incorporated phrases such as “reborn” (26 October 2019), “How much more ‘order’ will our fatherland resist?” (07 November 2019) or “humanity” (31 December 2019) which had appeared in the streets, expressing a desire for commonality as well as for fundamental changes.

6 Mercvria – Intersectionality on the Walls

My second example is an edition of the wall newspaper created by Antonia Taulis. Joining decades of criticism of the media landscape linked to the ruling establishment, Antonia Taulis named her project *Mercvria*, after the establishment newspaper *El Mercurio*, using it as a counter-informational medium placed in the streets.²¹ Taulis' compilations bring together different media as well as different times and eras. She combines quotes, illustrations, music, performances, and exclamations into what she terms a "wall newspaper." Printed in A0 format, she offers the newspaper for download and distribution, and pastes them on walls. Inspired by *Quebrantahuesos* [vulture and/or an annoying person], experimental poetry interventions with newspaper clippings placed on the walls of Santiago, by Nicanor Parra, Enrique Lihn and Alejandro Jodorowsky from 1952, Taulis sees art as a form of communication, and she distributes it like advertising in the city (interview with Taulis, 22 February 2023).

Mercvria shares common ground with Delight Lab and other artistic interventions in that she reacted quickly to the 2019/20 revolt. Taulis has taken up a variety of aspects and reflects on the diversity of demands. The first issue she published is from October/November 2019 and is called *Leaflet*. The concept of *el pueblo* is particularly evident in the 12 *Décimas*, the classical ten-line stanza of poetry, by singer Nano Stern in this edition. Here, too, intermedial memory plays a pivotal role, as he quotes from the Inti Illimani's song "Canción del Poder Popular."²²

Since this edition's first publication, the newspaper has focused on themes like protest, resistance and unity, linking the contingency of the moment with a range of thinkers from across the continent. Of special interest here is the

21 *Mercvria* refers to the significant Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*, which was founded in 1827 in Valparaíso, making it the oldest Spanish-language newspaper on the continent. Agustín Edwards Eastman (1927–2017), the influential publisher who inherited the family's newspaper business, played a role in the social polarisation of the 1960s and supported the coup (Kornbluh 2023, 47–49, 83–93).

22 Inti Illimani: "Porque esta vez no se trata de cambiar un presidente, será el pueblo quien construya un Chile bien diferente. Todos vénganse a juntar, tenemos la puerta abierta, y la Unidad Popular es para todo el que quiera." [Because this time it is not about changing a president, it will be *el pueblo* who will build a very different Chile. Everyone come together, we have the door open, and the *Unidad Popular* is for everyone who wants to join.] Nano Stern: "Porque esta vez no se trata de cambiar un presidente. Ha llegado la hora urgente de que el pueblo constituya: Será el pueblo quien construya un Chile bien diferente." [Because this time it is not about changing a president. The urgent time has come for *el pueblo* to constitute: It will be *el pueblo* who will build a very different Chile.]

edition *Matria* from March 2020 as it reflects a feminist critique of the unity implied in *el pueblo*.

It appeared just before the pandemic ended all protest activities, designed fully in red. In capital letters, the words “Matria” and “Machi” catch the eye first, the former being a response to ‘Patria,’ the fatherland, which thus is transformed into ‘motherland.’ The latter comes from Mapudungun, the language of the indigenous Mapuche, and can be translated as healer.

Prominently displayed in the issue is a quote from Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957), the Chilean writer, diplomat and Nobel Prize winner, which was revived as an important symbol during the revolt. It reads: “We, the women of the three social classes of this country, purge the guilt of never having looked each other in the face. Love lives on knowledge.” Taken from an article Mistral published in the newspaper *El Mercurio* in 1925, the quote brings to the fore the issue of class, a pervasive issue in Chile’s deeply unequal society (Hadzi-Vaskov and Ricci 2021, 9). The collective’s feminisation in the quote also presents a further critique of any homogenous notion of unity; it trisects *el pueblo* intersectionally, pointing towards axes of class as well as gender and raising the issue of discrimination.

Another quote on *Matria* further foregrounds the critique of discrimination by stating: “We²³ do not want to die. But we are not afraid. Because we are part of the earth. And the earth is not afraid of anyone.” This quote is from Soraya Maicoño, a spokesperson of the indigenous Mapuche community. In line with feminist critique, she is concerned with class issues but also ethnicity: the indigenous communities, *los pueblos originarios*, have, for centuries, experienced discrimination, expropriation, violence, and death.²⁴ *Mercvria* powerfully amplifies this perspective, magnifying nuanced layers of meaning embedded within unifying terms like *el pueblo*. Going beyond a simple call back to the period before the dictatorship, *Matria* thus unveils the inscription of implicit meanings into terms that refer to the collective, shedding light on marginalised voices within the societal fabric in a way that resonates with contemporary realities.

Another quote by Mistral, from her book *El voto femenino* (1928), is to be found on the left side of *Matria*: “I don’t believe in the women’s parliament, because I don’t believe in the men’s parliament either.” Nearly a hundred years

23 Spanish has a grammatical gender in which the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ can be ‘nosotros’ or ‘nosotras.’ Here the feminine form ‘nosotras’ is used.

24 A first moment of institutional representation for the Mapuche community was the Constitutional Convention that came together in 2021 led first by president Elisa Loncón.

later, existing institutions fail to adequately represent the heterogeneity of the population, due to their origins in an electoral system established under dictatorship. This quote recognises that genuine representation of *el pueblo* is compromised when political institutions are formulated without their direct participation (Friz 2023, 61). In this sense, the 2019 revolt reflects the crisis of a political paradigm that has historically treated the nation as a homogenous entity since Chile's independence (Pinto 2003, 95). The revolt, then, saw a general desire for unity, but also a rejection of unified identity, which found its way into cultural expressions, especially those present in the *Plaza Dignidad*, where it helped to strengthen aspirations of social change (Pacheco Habert Torres-Alruiz, and Cuevas Vargas 2020, 74). Traditional social movements were led by worker's unions, peasants, and *pobladores* [shantytown dwellers]; the contemporary social movements, as exemplified in 2019, were comprised of indigenous, feminist, student, and environmental activists, including many retirees and teachers (Garcés Durán 2020, 23).²⁵ When linked to a wider array of memories of the past, the historical keyword *el pueblo* can act as a catalyst for new solidarities, allowing for connections between the old and the new. This is made possible especially through the voices of indigenous, feminist, and student dissidents, channelled through *Matria*. With the variety of demands voiced in 2019, it is all the more necessary to ask how "a common plane without homogenizing differences and without falling into a paternalistic logic" (Gago 2020, 169) can be produced; a question that Mercvria engages with.

Of particular interest to this article's exploration of the mobilisation of memories through words is the edition's inclusion of Cecilia Vicuña's artwork *Palabrarmas*. This title is a portmanteau, based on a play on words from *palabra* [word], *armas* [weapons], *labrar* [to carve], and *más* [more] and has come to signify the type of hybrid neologisms that first appeared as a book in Buenos Aires in 1984, with a cover drawn by Vicuña during her time in exile in 1974. Taulis chose several word combinations to include in *Matria*, such as *CONRAZÓN*, meaning both 'with reason' [con razón] and 'heart' [corazón], *CADaERror*, 'every mistake' [cada error] and 'to fall' [caer], and *ORGANicamenteIZAR*, 'organically' [orgánicamente] and 'organise' [organizar].²⁶

25 This perspective oversimplifies the involvement of the indigenous Mapuche, who also played a pivotal role in the *tomas* (occupations) during the 1960s and early 1970s as mentioned above (Winn 2020a, 23).

26 On the occasion of a solo exhibition by Vicuña in Santiago in May 2023, the two women collaborated directly. As a result, several drawings that Vicuña had made in London in 1974 found their way into the urban space. One of them is the painting *PALABRARMAS*.

Following Astrid Erll (2011), I understand these *armed words* as a travelling memory. This concept brings three aspects into the analysis which elucidate their critical potential to reshape dominant memories: first, the *Palabrarmas* and their transnational history showcase that national cultures of memories are not clearly delineated; memories of the dictatorship in Chile, as well as in other countries of the Southern Cone, can be similar. The dictatorships were all headed by militaries and fell in line with the ideologies of the Cold War. Second, they indicate that national cultures of memory are themselves heterogeneous as divergent group memories coexist. This is particularly helpful to understand the post-dictatorship in Chile: while some fought to keep the memory of the crimes committed during the dictatorship alive, others defended what happened, considering the coup a necessary action against the UP. Third, travelling memories direct attention to communities that function beyond the national framework (Erll 2011, 8). In the case of South America, this perspective allows for the inclusion of the violent experiences of groups that differ from the traditional so-called political enemies, such as indigenous or LGBTIQ+ communities. I would add that describing Vicuña's and Taulis' cooperation as a travelling memory also calls for consideration of the fact that these mnemonic works have left their original temporal frame: Vicuña created her *Palabrarmas* within the oppression and violence of the dictatorship, and Taulis brought them to the urban sphere during the revolt from 2019. They travelled through time and were remediated "in the *longue durée*" (Erll 2022, 11) of the mnemonic landscape, calling into question the very distinction between the experiences of the different generations. Metaphorical and abstract in nature, the contemporary *Palabrarmas* function as a resurrection of the opposition and resistance to the dictatorship that took place from within Chile as well as from exile. In Mercvria this cultural countertradition is re-established, updated, and linked to more recent social struggles.²⁷

One sentence used both by Delight Lab and Mercvria points to their common desire for fundamental and systemic change: "Destroy the logic of the system in our hearts." This sentence was written by José Angel Cuevas, a Chilean

27 This resurgence of specific words was also strongly evident in the music that accompanied the revolt in 2019/20, where the three most frequently sung songs came from previous decades: "El pueblo unido jamás será vencido" [The people united will never be defeated], written by Sergio Ortega and the band Quilapayún in 1973 (this even turned into a famous protest song throughout the whole continent), Víctor Jara's "El derecho de vivir en paz" [The right to live in peace] from 1971 and "El baile de los que sobran" [The dance of those who are left out] by Los Prisioneros from 1986, the latter of which originated in the resistance to the dictatorship.



FIGURE 6.3 Mercvria, *Nº1 Materia*, 2020, offset print, 100,0 x 70,0 cm, José Miguel de la Barra, Santiago de Chile
 PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTONIA TAULIS, COPYRIGHTS: MERCVRIA. THE WALL MAGAZINE HAS BEEN INTERVENED IN. IT SAYS “APRUEBO,” MEANING “I AGREE,” REFERRING TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED FOR 26 APRIL 2020 AND POSTPONED TO 25 OCTOBER DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

poet who remained in the country during the civil-military dictatorship in a so-called *insilio* [internal exile]. On *Matria* it can be read above the quotes from protesters; Delight Lab, in cooperation with several other artists, projected it on the equestrian statue in *Plaza Dignidad* within the framework of the “Week of Visual Arts” on 24 September 2022. This artistic action was cross-faded from the opposite side of the square by the Carabiniers of Chile, which marked the second time that the collective experienced censorship. Even though completely different in terms of form, design and execution, the mutual use of the quote by Cuevas testifies to the similarities that connect Delight Lab’s projections and Mercvria’s *Matria*: they aim to support contemporary social movements with words and sentences charged with layers of memory.

7 Conclusion

The artistic interventions of recent decades in Chile demonstrate that they are not just a by-product of social movements, but that they play a significant role in the representation and realisation of a new social order. The muralist brigades, including the *Brigadas Ramona Parra*, graphic designers like Vicente and Antonio Larrea, and writers such as Antonio Skármeta and Pablo Neruda, contributed to a unique imaginary in support of the political project of the UP. During the dictatorship that followed, more performative actions, such as those carried out by CADA, expressed resistance to state violence. These diverse aesthetic and social visions serve as examples for contemporary artists. Even though the landscape of artistic interventions in urban streets has evolved significantly since the decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, amid this transformation, the enduring essence of their messages, hopes and ideas remains palpable. Delight Lab, Mercvria, and others have used various means to bring the words, slogans, signs, and symbols of these previous artists back to the streets in support of the protests that began in October 2019.

This chapter argued that specific keywords can function as a powerful means by which artists and activists associate contemporary protests with earlier social struggles. Most of Delight Lab’s and Mercvria’s interventions depend on the remediation of well-known expressions of protest, which allow their artistic interventions to include memories “across space and time” as well as a movement “from one medium to another” (Erl 2018, 312). By singling out and re-contextualising words and phrases from the streets, they amplify, at least temporarily, their impact and significance. In doing this, the arts offer an opportunity for dialogue, serving as a nexus where different perspectives converge and intermingle. Within the fractures of representation (Richard 2020,

105), they provide a medium for highlighting different perspectives, challenge established narratives and amplify marginalised voices.

This chapter has demonstrated that the term *el pueblo*, featuring prominently in artistic interventions and graffiti, was closely linked to the hopeful period of the *Unidad Popular* and the figure of Allende. If it is indeed undeniable that “Salvador Allende’s government was a celebration, sparked by the transformations brought about by the *Unidad Popular*” (Moulián 2020, 11), the memory of this era has great potential to inspire new activism. Given that negating discourses regarding the 1973 military coup are still prevalent, *el pueblo* proves to be a crucial keyword, pointing back to the exceptional time in which ‘the people’ found political representation. Memories of the UP and Allende’s visions of society, brought into the public space by grassroots campaigns but consolidated through the arts, have a powerful mobilising effect, as they express a historically-grounded, and therefore thinkable, sense of unity and solidarity. Yet this powerful effect was created, not inherited. With the socio-political upheaval following the failure of the UP, the rupture caused by the coup d’état and the subsequent dictatorship, the referendum of 1988 and the re-democratisation, common memory narratives of the UP have been lacking (Garretón 2003, 215–16). This absence of a shared history has notoriously hindered the formation of a national community. *El pueblo*, then, did not primarily serve to establish a common memory, but to cultivate a community in the present, and to redraw the boundaries of the heterogeneous community of protesters and dissenters.

The specific cases examined in this article demonstrate various aspects of the ‘word work’ of the 2019 revolt. Delight Lab’s light projections excel in capturing, condensing, and emphasising crucial words and ideas during protests, presenting them on a massive scale. By rendering the words easily readable and accessible to all, they successfully created a foundation for novel forms of collectivity. Mercvria, on the other hand, offers a distinctive level of detail, with its composition of literature, protest slogans, music, and visual art. Through the reworking of well-known leftist words and phrases, its various issues illustrate how different aspects of unity and solidarity associated with *el pueblo* can be represented. These interventions demonstrate that cultural work is “a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to change dominant narratives” (Rigney 2021, 19).

Mercvria and Delight Lab responded to the denial of an open debate in 2019 and 2020, and showed that “the creative arts can be seen as catalysts in creating new memories” (Rigney 2021, 12). Their means for doing so were derived directly from the protests, and built on a diversity of symbols from the UP era. In doing so, both art initiatives foregrounded the harsh fact that, even after 30

years of democracy, the transition had only caused *el pueblo* to be “politically erased from any political lexicon” (Karmy 2023, 160). Memories evoking “positive emotions such as joy” related to the UP government (López, Galaz, and Piper 2020, 31) broke open the institutionalised narrative that all social distrust, contradictions, and disagreements had been overcome after 1990. Delight Lab and Mercvria embraced the frictions in the official discourse and reinterpreted the public space through a new reference system. Just like the interventions during the UP captured hope for the future by presenting images of a life yet to come (Longoni, Carvajal, and Vindel 2012, 233), Mercvria and Delight Lab captured the revolt’s sense of hope that change was already happening.

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Legislating the Historical Resonance of Boycott in Germany: Memory and *Staatsräson* in the Bundestag's 2019 Resolution against BDS

Michiel Bot

1 Introduction

On July 9, 2005, a coalition of more than 170 Palestinian civil society groups called “upon international civil society organisations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era” (BDS 2005). The date marked the first anniversary of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the “Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory” (ICJ Reports 2004). Israel had ignored the Court’s opinion that the construction of the wall was to be halted immediately, that the parts that had already been built were to be dismantled, and that Israel was to make reparations for all damage caused by the construction. The boycott coalition called for “non-violent punitive measures” “until Israel meets its obligation to recognise the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194” (BDS 2005).¹

The call has been heeded by activists and organisations all over the world (Thrall 2018). Because the Israeli government considered the global movement for BDS a major security threat, the Ministry for Strategic Affairs implemented

1 On the global campaign for BDS, see generally Barghouti 2011, Thrall 2018, and the edited volumes, Wiles 2013 and Estefan, Kuoni, and Raicovich 2017.

a global strategy to try to suppress it (Perugini and Gordon 2015). Apart from banning and discrediting human rights organisations and BDS activists, the Israeli government and affiliated organisations such as NGO Monitor lobbied governments around the world to censor the BDS movement. As a result of this lobby, thirty-eight states in the United States now have anti-BDS legislation in place that prohibits state contracts with, or state investments in companies and entities that engage in BDS, even though several courts have blocked such laws as conflicting with the constitutional right to freedom of political expression (Palestine Legal 2023). Attempts to criminalise BDS on the U.S. federal level have so far been unsuccessful. In 2016, the British Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government prohibited local governments from using decisions on pension investments to pursue BDS, although a British court ruled that this prohibition was outside his competence. In France, Germany, and Spain, local government authorities have refused meeting spaces to Palestine solidarity activists calling for BDS, although the courts have generally ruled that such refusals conflict with the fundamental right to freedom of assembly. And BDS activists in various countries have been the target of criminal prosecutions for allegedly violating anti-discrimination laws, even though these prosecutions have generally led to acquittals (Bot 2019).

In 2009, the European Court of Human Rights still upheld France's criminal conviction of an elected mayor who had asked the local government's catering services to boycott Israeli orange juice in order to protest the "atrocities" of then prime-minister Ariel Sharon (*Willem c. France*, par. 7). The mayor had been convicted for discriminating against Israeli producers of orange juice on the ground of their nationality (*Willem c. France*, par. 16). However, in 2020, the Court unequivocally recognised that calling for a boycott is an "act to provoke or stimulate debate on a topic of general interest" that is protected by the fundamental right to freedom of expression, and that the campaign of a French BDS group handing out flyers in a supermarket had nothing to do with racism, antisemitism, hatred, violence, or intolerance (*Baldassi c. France*, par. 70).

In *Willem c. France*, the dissenting Judge Jungwiert had already objected that "[i]t is easy to imagine that in a similar case, a mayor (who is almost always a member of a political party) calls, for instance, for a boycott of products from the United States to protest against the war in Iraq, of Russian products because of the conflict in Chechnya, or of Chinese merchandise for occupying Tibet" (*Willem c. France*, Dissenting Opinion of Judge Jungwiert). Although the majority of the judges were not persuaded by Judge Jungwiert's hypothetical comparisons in this particular case, his dissenting opinion points to the centrality of comparison, both to boycotting as a political practice and to discussions

and judgments about the legality and legitimacy of boycotts in general and of BDS in particular.² Indeed, to call a political action a boycott is always already to compare it, at least implicitly, to the successful 1880 campaign of the Irish National Land League against eponymous English land agent Charles Boycott. And as I mentioned above, the BDS movement explicitly compares itself to the global boycott of the South African apartheid regime. However, the German Bundestag (the parliament) has decided on a different comparison.

On May 15, 2019, the Bundestag adopted a resolution titled, “Countering the BDS Movement with Determination—Fighting Anti-Semitism” [*Der BDS-Bewegung entschlossen entgegenzutreten—Antisemitismus bekämpfen*], which stated:

The Bundestag wants to decide [*wolle beschließen*]:

I. The German Bundestag determines [*stellt fest*]:

(...) The model of argumentation and the methods of the BDS movement are antisemitic. Moreover, the calls for campaigning for a boycott of Israeli artists, as well as the stickers on Israeli trade products that are supposed to deter people from buying them, recall [*erinnern an*] the most terrible phase of German history. “Don’t Buy” [*sic*] stickers of the BDS movement on Israeli products inevitably awaken [*wecken unweigerlich*] associations with the Nazi slogan, “Don’t buy from Jews!” and similar graffiti’s on storefronts and shop windows. (Bundestag 2019)³

Although the Bundestag determines in this resolution that the BDS movement’s calls and stickers inevitably awaken associations with the 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses—note the tension between the wilful speech acts of resolving, deciding, and determining and the alleged inevitability of the awakening of associations—BDS in fact bears few resemblances to the Nazi boycott. Whereas the Nazi boycott was a campaign led by a powerful government against an oppressed minority, the BDS movement is a grassroots protest movement of an oppressed minority against a powerful government. This makes the BDS movement much more similar to what are arguably the five

2 On the role of comparison in boycott politics, see the special issue on “The Politics of Boycott” of the *Radical History Review*, especially the introduction (Rothman and Zimmerman 2019) and Takriti 2019 on “lineages of boycott in Palestine.” See also Bot 2019.

3 All translations of German texts are mine unless otherwise noted. For an informative overview and analysis of the attempts to censor BDS in Germany, including the Bundestag resolution, see Hever 2019. For an in-depth analysis of the discourse on fighting anti-Semitism in Germany over the past two decades, see Younes 2020. For analyses of the Bundestag resolution, see Wetterau and Benz 2020, 59–64 (in German) and Asseburg 2019.

most famous boycotts in modern world history: the Boston Tea Party, the Irish National Land League's campaign against Charles Boycott, Gandhi's boycotts in India, the Civil Rights Movement's boycotts in the United States, and the global boycott against the South African apartheid government.

Of course, these famous boycotts were all grassroots campaigns against colonial regimes upheld by the British Empire and its postcolonial successors, and some German intellectuals have suggested that boycotts awaken very different associations in Germany than in other contexts. For instance, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, the director of the Center for Research on Antisemitism at Berlin's Technical University, has maintained that "[i]n Germany, a boycott is a difficult form of protest" (cited in Eddy and Marshall 2018). "Historically," Schüler-Springorum submitted, "it has a completely different resonance, as basically the Nazis' first step against an ethnic minority. Therefore it is simply not acceptable" (cited in Eddy and Marshall 2018).

However, despite her insistence on the need for a historical and contextual understanding of the resonance and associations of boycott in Germany, Schüler-Springorum, like the Bundestag resolution, ignores what is indisputably one of the most important boycotts in German history. From 1933 to 1941, Jewish groups, labour unions, and other civil society organisations in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and many other countries organised a global boycott to protest the Nazi government's anti-Semitism. Although there had been anti-Semitic boycotts of Jewish stores before, the April 1, 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses and Jewish lawyers and physicians to which the Bundestag resolution and Schüler-Springorum seem to be alluding was, in fact, a counter-boycott against this global boycott (Gottlieb 1982, 15–24; Bartrop and Grimm 2022, 8–9). The fact that Schüler-Springorum and the Bundestag resolution do not even mention this eight-year-long, global anti-Nazi boycott is surprising because, as I will argue in the next section, BDS is much more similar to this transnational solidarity boycott than to the national anti-Jewish boycotts imposed by the Nazi government.⁴

In this chapter, I develop a critique of the Bundestag's attempt to legislate the "inevitable" awakening of associations between calls for BDS and Nazi calls

4 In the German context, BDS is also more similar to the transnational post-World War I boycott of German scientists and scholarly organisations because of their role in spreading war propaganda, a boycott that led to the demise of German as one of the main languages of science (Reinbothe 2019). BDS is also more similar to the transnational anti-apartheid movement that had a prominent presence in both West and East Germany (Brede 2016, 359). And in his monograph on boycott in the context of organised labor in Germany, Gerhard Binkert mentions "numerous cases of boycott in the late 19th century," including blacklisting and consumer boycotts (Binkert 1981, 23).

for anti-Jewish boycotts. In the next section, I recall some of the basic events of the global boycott against the Nazis and of the controversial 1933 *Haavara* or transfer agreement with which the Nazis sought to undermine this boycott. In the subsequent section, I interpret the Bundestag's attempt to legislate "inevitable" associations between calls for BDS and Nazi calls for anti-Jewish boycotts, as well as the resolution's welcoming of the fact that various municipalities have refused financial support and meeting spaces to groups supporting BDS, as enactments of the controversial concept of *Staatsräson* that the resolution invokes twice. I conclude the chapter by arguing for a critical comparative engagement with the political history of boycott, to resist the Bundestag's legislation of exceptional associations between the global campaign for BDS and a national boycott with which it has little in common, and to explore associations and resonances between BDS and similar transnational solidarity boycotts. Thus, the chapter both interrogates and challenges the German state's attempt to change, by means of legislation, the memory of a political practice that already carries its own, primarily emancipatory memories, as well as the German state's attempt to rehabilitate a political concept tainted by a deeply anti-constitutional and anti-democratic genealogy.

2 The Global Anti-Nazi Boycott of the 1930s and the *Haavara* Agreement

Less than two months after Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933, a small American Jewish defence group named the Jewish War Veterans called for "a strict boycott against German merchandise to serve as protest against Nazi anti-Semitism" (*New York Times* 1933). On April 1, the German Nazi party organised the infamous nation-wide boycott against German Jews in order to counter the "anti-German atrocity propaganda and threats of boycott" by Anglo-American Jews (Gottlieb 1973, 199). On the same day in Paris, the International League Against Anti-Semitism in Paris declared a boycott of German goods "until the downfall of Adolf Hitler or the resumption of full rights for German Jews" (Black 1984, 80). The League proceeded to open boycott offices in Lyon, Nice, and Marseilles. On April 2 in Toronto, the boycott was adopted during a "mass protest meeting co-sponsored by Jewish and Christian clergy" (Black 1984, 80). On April 6, the Polish Undersecretary of State told the German ambassador that the Polish government would not interfere with the anti-Nazi boycott, which had been enforced by violent mobs (Black 1984, 80). On April 9, London and Manchester police, fearing "Polish-style boycott violence," demanded that store owners remove window posters reading "Boycott German Goods" (Black

1984, 80). However, this prohibition led to a debate in parliament during which Churchill called for an end to the suppression of the boycott (Black 1984, 80). On April 13, Samuel Untermyer, citing the inspiration of the boycott by Jewish shopkeepers in London, called for a boycott during a meeting of the American Friends of the Hebrew University (Hawkins 2022, 147). This call was the beginning of what Untermyer's biographer describes as "the most ambitious boycott attempted in the United States since the boycotts of British merchandise in the period immediately before the American Revolution" (Hawkins 2022, 148). Untermyer became the head of the American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights, an "ad-hoc group" soon renamed the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights (Gottlieb 1973, 199–200).

The boycott movement continued to spread in May, 1933, with boycotts in Cairo, Gibraltar, and Buenos Aires; examples included a disruption of a screening of a German film in Paris; a boycott of German ocean liners in London; and boycott groups in Amsterdam who printed thousands of "boycott stamps" with a "swastika transmuted into a four-headed snake behind prison bars" for use on letters and packages, which soon became an "international boycott tool" (Black 1984, 125). Towards the end of May, the British Trades Union Congress declared the anti-Nazi boycott mandatory for its members, as did the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions and the Dutch Labour Party. On July 20, an international boycott conference was held in the Carlton Hotel in Amsterdam, the World Jewish Economic Conference—a nod to the World Economic Conference held in London—with delegates from sixteen countries, including the U.S., Britain and France, South Africa and Egypt, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, and Latvia present, and the support of "allied Jewish organisations" in ten other countries (Hawkins 2022, 152). The conference resolved, among other things, "[t]hat boycotting of German goods, products and shipping throughout the civilised world is the only effective weapon for world Jewry and humanity by way of defence and protection of Jewish rights, property and dignity in Germany" (Birchall 1933; Gottlieb 1982, 386). Anticipating a further transnational coordination and consolidation of the boycott, various boycott movements adopted the slogan, "Germany will crack this winter" (Black 1984, 185).

The boycott lasted until October, 1941, and significantly impacted German exports (Gottlieb 1973, 198). The Nazis repeatedly recognised that it hurt their economic interests. Indeed, the strong resonance of this transnational boycott in Germany is evident from the fact that Hitler still complained about the boycott and its demonisation of Germany in an address to the Reichstag on April 28, 1939:

It is likewise an unbearable burden for world economic relations that it should be possible in some countries for some ideological reason

or other to let loose a wild boycott agitation [*eine wilde Boykotthetze*] against other countries and their goods and so practically to eliminate them from the market. It is my belief, Mr. Roosevelt, that it would be a great service if you, with your great influence, would remove these barriers genuinely to free world trade, beginning with the United States. For I am convinced that if the leaders of nations are not even capable of regulating production in their own countries, or of removing boycott agitation [*Boykotthetzen*] pursued for ideological reasons which can damage trade relations between countries to so great an extent, there is much less prospect of achieving any really fruitful step toward improvement of economic relations by means of international agreements. Only thus will the equal right to buy and sell on the world market be secured, indeed for everyone. (Gottlieb 1982, 346 (trans. modified) and Hitler 1939, 58)

Not all Jewish organisations supported the boycott. On the contrary, in August 1933, the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the German Zionist Federation concluded the controversial *Haavara* or transfer agreement with the German Ministry of Economic Affairs, which undermined the boycott (Bartrop and Grimm 2022, 101; Brenner 1984). Historian Lawrence Baron considers the *Haavara* agreement to be “the most important German response to the anti-Nazi boycott and the economic impact of anti-Semitic discrimination.” He explains the details of the agreement as follows:

The Germans promised to waive restrictions on taking currency out of the country for Jews emigrating to Palestine who were allowed to keep £1,000 of their assets to qualify for settlement in Palestine outside of British immigration quotas for poorer Jews going there. In return these and potential future German Jewish immigrants to Palestine placed the remainder of their capital in blocked accounts to subsidise the purchase of German goods for export to Zionist enterprises in Palestine. The savings accrued by the Zionists from this method of price reduction on needed German products were converted into cash allotments for the German Jewish immigrants who received approximately 50% of the money they had left behind in Germany. (Baron 1987, 186)

According to Baron, the agreement was an economic win both for the Nazis and for the Jewish economy in Palestine. But in signing the agreement, the World Zionist Organisation broke the anti-Nazi boycott.

I have recalled these basic events of the global anti-Nazi boycott of the 1930s and the *Haavara* agreement because of the Bundestag resolution's claim

that BDS “inevitably awakens associations” with the Nazi boycott of Jews, and because of Stefanie Schüler-Springorum’s claim that “historically, boycott has a completely different resonance” in Germany than it does elsewhere. This brief overview demonstrates that the alleged awakening of associations between calls for BDS and the Nazi calls for boycotting Jewish businesses is not based on historical similarity. Instead of resembling the anti-Jewish boycotts instigated by the Nazi government, BDS is much more similar to the anti-Nazi boycott of the 1930s. Like the anti-Nazi boycott (and unlike the anti-Jewish boycotts of the Nazi government), BDS is a grassroots movement founded by a coalition of civil society organisations. Moreover, like the anti-Nazi boycott (and unlike the anti-Jewish boycotts), BDS is a global solidarity movement fighting for the (human) rights of an oppressed group.

When interpreting BDS historically, in a German context, it is also important to recall that the origins of the strong trade relations between Germany and Israel which calls for BDS in Germany target—Germany is Israel’s most important trading partner in the European Union—lie in the *Haavara* agreement. Indeed, due to the *Haavara* agreement, Germany had overtaken the United Kingdom, which was the Mandatory Power, as the first exporting country to Palestine in 1937 (Bartrop and Grimm 2022, 102). Although the Nazis did not support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, out of an anti-Semitic fear of strengthening the supposed global Jewish conspiracy (Bartrop and Grimm 2022, 102), their objective in concluding the *Haavara* agreement, apart from breaking the global anti-Nazi boycott, was to get German Jews to leave Germany (Brenner 1984).

3 *Staatsräson*, Memory, and Miracles: Taking Exception to Historical Comparison

How, then, does the Bundestag resolution intervene in the remembrance of boycott history in Germany? In this section, I interpret the Bundestag’s attempt to legislate an alternative historical resonance of boycott in Germany as an enactment of the concept of *Staatsräson*, which the resolution mentions twice: “A decided, unconditional no to hatred against Jewesses and Jews of whatever nationality is part of the German *Staatsräson*”; and “The security of Israel is part of the *Staatsräson* of our country” (Bundestag 2019).

Staatsräson is a controversial concept. According to conservative Catholic constitutional theorist and Nazi lawyer Carl Schmitt, the doctrine of *Staatsräson*, which originated in the Italian Renaissance, used to be invoked to justify the breach of a rule when special circumstances or a state of emergency required

making an exception (Schmitt 2017, 56). This doctrine is also at the heart of Schmitt's antiliberal theory of sovereignty that I will briefly discuss towards the end of this section. In a 1980 article, legal scholar Helmut Rumpf argued that since the mid-19th century, the intellectual tradition of liberalism considered the idea of *Staatsräson* to be fundamentally at odds with the democratic rule of law and, in the twentieth century, came to associate it with fascist, Nazi, and authoritarian forms of anachronistic backsliding into Europe's absolutist past (Rumpf 1980, 273–74). However, according to Rumpf, liberal democratic constitutions also inevitably contain a specific idea of *Staatsräson* because *Staatsräson* is “as an existential principle, a primordial principle of the state” (Rumpf 1980, 285). This is why it is necessary to rethink and rehabilitate the idea of *Staatsräson*, Rumpf argues, orienting it towards preserving “the spirit of the constitution” (Rumpf 1980, 292). However, although *Staatsräson* has always been invoked to justify prioritising the preservation of one's own state (Michaels 2023b), the concept has curiously been rehabilitated primarily in the context of claims by German government officials and political leaders about Germany's “special” or “exceptional” relation with Israel. Memory plays a central role in this rehabilitated use of *Staatsräson*.

The first use of the concept of *Staatsräson* by a German government official in the context of German-Israeli relations was a 2005 article by Rudolf Dreßler, a former German ambassador to Israel (Hever 2019, 87; Michaels 2023a, 34).⁵ Pointing to the importance of good relations with Israel for Germany's global reputation and to the fact that many of Israel's driving forces consider Germany “politically and economically, scientifically and technologically the second most important partner after the United States,” Dreßler argued: “the secure existence of Israel is in the German national interest, and is thus part of our *Staatsräson*” (Dreßler 2005). The latter phrase contains a curious expansion of the meaning of *Staatsräson*. The concept has usually been invoked to justify the suspension of the rule of law, not when suspending the law just happened to be in the national interest, but when what Dreßler calls the “secure existence” of the state was at stake. That is, *Staatsräson* has usually been invoked to justify not simply what is politically expedient but what is politically necessary. However, Dreßler connects the secure existence of the Israeli state to the *Staatsräson* of the German state without arguing that the preservation of the German state depends on the preservation of the Israeli state. He simply argues that the secure existence of Israel is good for Germany's global

5 Michaels finds one precedent in a 2001 article in *Die Welt* by a journalist: Michaels 2023a, 34.

reputation and that Israel is an important political, economic, scientific, and technological partner of Germany.

However, this is not the only expansion of the meaning of *Staatsräson* in Dreßler's article. From 2003 onwards, Dreßler reports, he had been invited to the annual Holocaust commemoration in the remembrance centre Yad Vashem, which he claimed was part of the Israeli *Staatsräson*:

Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel finds no equivalent in the German culture. The memory of the horror, of the oppression, of the terror, of the events characterized by destruction and mass annihilation can have no equivalent. Holocaust Remembrance Day in Yad Vashem is part of the Israeli *Staatsräson*. (Dreßler 2005)

By using the concept of *Staatsräson* in this passage, Dreßler suggests that the preservation of the Israeli state hinges on the official cultivation of the memory of the Holocaust as incomparable (without equivalent). Whereas the concept of *Staatsräson* has usually been invoked by states deciding that exceptional circumstances necessitate exceptional measures, Dreßler connects the exceptionality associated with the concept of *Staatsräson* to the *content* or *substance* of those measures. To preserve the Israeli state against existential threats—Israel declared the state of exception on the day of its foundation, and this state of exception has been extended ever since (Sivan and Laborie 2016, 139)—it needs to officially commemorate the Holocaust as an exceptional historical event.

According to Dreßler, Israel's decision to invite the German ambassador to Holocaust Remembrance Day should not be interpreted as a sign of the 'normalisation' of German-Israeli relations, because: "The German-Israeli relations cannot be 'normal'—conforming to the norm. Put differently: according to the regulations or ordinary, common or average" (Dreßler 2005). Dreßler associated normalisation with "*Schlussstrich-Debatte*" about the Second World War: discussions that want to put a full stop behind the past and move on with a clean slate (Dreßler 2005).

While the concept of normalisation had played an important role in German foreign affairs since the 1970s, the concept has also been associated with the position of conservative historians in the 1986 *Historikerstreit* or historians' dispute. Comparatist Michael Rothberg summarises this dispute as follows: "At a moment when Christian Democratic Chancellor Helmut Kohl was seeking to 'normalise' West Germany's position in global politics, [philosopher Jürgen] Habermas saw such prominent intellectuals as Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber attempting to rehabilitate a 'positive' national identity by

evading the gravity of the Holocaust through politically tendentious comparisons” (Rothberg 2022, 1317). Produced towards the end of the Cold War, these ‘normalising’ historical comparisons sought to relativise German responsibility for the Holocaust, for instance by portraying Germany as a victim of Soviet aggression. In reaction against these attempts at normalising by relativising, i.e. diminishing German responsibility, Habermas successfully promoted a discourse of absolute responsibility and of the Holocaust as a singular historical event that was incomparable in its exceptionality. But as various scholars have demonstrated and as various scholars and artists have painfully experienced (such as race critical scholar Anna-Esther Younes, historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe, and various curators and artists of the 2022 edition of art festival documenta), the discourse of the exceptionality of the Holocaust has more recently foreclosed any attempts to relate Holocaust memory to any other instances of racial violence, especially instances of colonial violence (Rothberg 2009; Younes 2020; Dirk Moses 2020).

Angela Merkel subsequently⁶ used the concept of *Staatsräson* in her 2008 speech to the Israeli Knesset on the occasion of Israel’s sixtieth anniversary:

Every federal government and every chancellor before me was committed to Germany’s special historical responsibility for the security of Israel. This historical responsibility of Germany is part of my country’s *Staatsräson*. (Merkel 2008)

Merkel was the first German chancellor invited to speak to the Knesset. Like Dreßler’s article, Merkel’s speech revolved around the exceptionality of German-Israeli relations because of the memory of the Holocaust: “Germany and Israel are and remain—indeed forever—connected in a special way through the memory of the Shoah” (Merkel 2008). Merkel recalls that for a long time, Israeli passports made an exception for travel to Germany. The fact that this is no longer the case, Merkel argued, does not make the relations between Germany and Israel any less exceptional. In Merkel’s speech, the language of the exception takes a particular theological form, particularly in its reference to the concept of the miracle.⁷ Merkel said:

6 Ralf Michaels notes that Merkel had already used the concept in the context of German-Israeli relations in a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007, but that this speech received little attention (Michaels 2023a, 33).

7 Shir Hever points to the theological stance towards the Israeli state of the Evangelical Church, Germany’s biggest church, as an important influence on German-Israeli relations (Hever 2019, 3). See also historian A. Dirk Moses’ critique of “Germany’s Catechism” in Dirk Moses 2021.

I could not stand before you today and speak to you as the chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany raised in the former GDR, if after the Second World War in the then Federal Republic, there had not been politicians like Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, and Helmut Kohl. They believed in the power of freedom, the power of democracy, and the power of human dignity. In this way, they have been capable of making the seemingly impossible possible: the fulfillment [*Vollendung*] of the unity of Germany in peace and freedom, and with that the atonement [*Versöhnung*] of the European continent.

From the experience that the impossible can become possible, we can draw the determination and the confidence that any effort will pay off that brings the Near East a big step closer to a peaceful cooperation. Or to say it with the well-known words of David Ben-Gurion: “He who does not believe in miracles [*Wunder*] is not a realist.” When today, on the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the state Israel, we consider the German-Israeli relations, we know that his sentence has proven to be both realistic and correct. Yes, these are special, unique relations—with everlasting responsibility for the past, with common values, with mutual trust, with great solidarity with each other, and with united confidence. (Merkel 2008)

According to Merkel, the special relations between Germany and Israel originate from the exceptional violence of the Holocaust and have been redeemed by leaders who believe in miracles by acknowledging Germany’s exceptional responsibility and by acting on it. Just as Dreßler argued that Germany’s “special responsibility” was being accomplished by Germany’s military cooperation with Israel—the crew of a German warship visited Yad Vashem during a joint military exercise (Dreßler 2005)—Merkel’s speech, which made repeated reference to Iran’s nuclear capabilities, served to legitimate the supply of submarines with nuclear capabilities to the Israeli navy (Hever 2019, 87).

In 2017, then Social Democratic (SPD) leader Martin Schulz used the concept of *Staatsräson* in a televised debate with Merkel (Hever 2019, 87). Schulz said: “There are for instance young Palestinian men who come to us, who have been raised with a deeply rooted anti-Semitism, who must be told in clear language: “There is only room for you in this country if you accept that Germany is a country that protects Israel, that that is our *Staatsräson*” (cited in Fruchtmann 2017).⁸ Schulz’s invocation of the concept of *Staatsräson* exemplifies the

⁸ On October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas killed, took hostage, and kidnapped hundreds of people in Southern Israel, German Chancellor Scholz also equated the security of Israel with Germany’s *Staatsräson* altogether: “Israel’s security is German *Staatsräson*” (Scholz 2023).

discourse that race-critical theorist Anna-Esther Younes analyzes as a racializing discourse of “anti-anti-Semitism” that revolves around the figure of “the anti-Semitic Palestinian” (or Arab or Muslim) and around the category of “Israel-related anti-Semitism” in German citizenship policy discourses in the wake of the 1999 citizenship law and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Younes 2020, 256). Indeed, on November 14, 2023, the CDU/CSU introduced a “Draft for a Law to End the Residency and Prevent the Naturalization of Anti-Semitic Foreigners” (Bundestag 2023). The draft law aims at “better protection against a further consolidation and extension of an anti-Semitism that has ‘immigrated’ from abroad” and would make “the procuring of German citizenship dependent on a commitment [*Bekanntnis*] to Israel’s right to exist and a declaration [*Erklärung*] that the applicant for naturalisation does not pursue, nor has pursued activities against the existence of the state of Israel” (Bundestag 2023).

The Bundestag’s anti-BDS resolution not only posits that the security of Israel is part of Germany’s *Staatsräson*, but the resolution itself is already an application of this idea. In welcoming “[t]he fact that countless municipalities have already decided to refuse the BDS movement [...] financial support and the allocation of communal spaces,” the Bundestag welcomes the suspension of the fundamental right to freedom of assembly of BDS activists. German courts have so far confirmed that the refusals of municipal meeting spaces to BDS activists violate the German Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, and in 2023, a Frankfurt court confirmed in a case finding a ban on an assembly on “Peace and Justice in the Near East” unconstitutional that “the observance of fundamental rights is not conditional on a *Staatsräson*” (VG Frankfurt 5. Kammer 2023). Furthermore, the German Federal Constitutional Court already recognised in 1958 that calling for a boycott was protected political speech in a landmark judgment about a 1950 cultural boycott against Veit Harlan, the director of the infamous anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* (Lüth; Bot 2019). In determining, without any evidence, that “the mode of argumentation and methods of the BDS movement are anti-Semitic,” the Bundestag criminalises BDS activists, suspending their fundamental right to freedom of speech.

Furthermore, in “determining” or “deciding” that “Don’t Buy’ [sic] stickers of the BDS movement on Israeli products inevitably awaken associations with the Nazi slogan, ‘Don’t buy from Jews!’ and similar graffiti on storefronts and shop windows,” the Bundestag seeks to regulate what “inevitably” awakens which memories in people’s minds. Thus, the Bundestag resolution also suspends the fundamental right to freedom of thought.

Although much less discussed than freedom of expression, freedom of thought is at the core of the political tradition of liberalism.⁹ For instance, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was primarily an attempt to confront the threat of a "tyranny of the majority" in democracies, not only to "freedom of discussion" but to "freedom of thought" (Mill 2007, 8 and 19). Thomas Hobbes had already argued that the sovereign may control the public expression of opinion in order to keep the peace, but not what people think in private. Interestingly, in light of Angela Merkel's conceptualisation of the "redemption" of German-Israeli relations as a miracle, the most pertinent passage defending freedom of thought in Hobbes' *Leviathan* is specifically concerned with the belief in miracles: exceptional events that disrupt the normal course of history:

A private man has always the liberty (because thought is free) to believe or not believe, in his heart, those acts that have been given out for miracles, according as he shall see what benefit can accrue, by men's belief, to those that pretend or countenance them, and thereby conjecture whether they be miracles or lies. But when it comes to confession of that faith, the private reason must submit to the public; that is to say, to God's lieutenant [i.e. the sovereign or the state]. (Hobbes 1994, 300)

Carl Schmitt identified this passage, in his 1938 book on *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, as "[t]he seed of death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within and brought about the end of the mortal god" (Schmitt 2008, 57). Indeed, Schmitt lamented: "Only a few years after the appearance of the *Leviathan*, the first liberal Jew [Spinoza] noticed the barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state" (Schmitt 2008, 57, trans. modified). Allowing private citizens "the right of private freedom of thought and belief," Schmitt argued, erodes the state's vitality from within (Ibid.). In his 1922 *Political Theology*, Schmitt had already argued that "[t]he state of exception has a meaning for jurisprudence that is analogous to the meaning that the miracle has for theology" (Schmitt 2004, 43). For Schmitt, letting private citizens decide whether or not they believe in miracles completely undermines the sovereign's position as "the one who decides on the state of exception" (Schmitt 2004, 13). According to Schmitt's antiliberal political theory, the state should dictate the belief in exceptional events. Drefßler's suggestion that the preservation of the Israeli state depends on official commemorations of

9 In contemporary jurisprudence, freedom of thought still appears, for instance, in cases about proselytism, such as *Kokkinakis v. Greece* before the European Court of Human Rights.

the Holocaust as an exceptional event, the requirement that Palestinians or other migrants profess Israel's "right to exist," and the Bundestag's attempt to legislate inevitable associations between calls for BDS and Nazi calls for anti-Jewish boycotts are entirely in line with this political theory. Indeed, the Bundestag not only prescribes the form of official commemoration, but also seeks to dictate the memory of its subjects.

4 Resisting the Exception

Calls for BDS and the Bundestag's anti-BDS resolution instantiate a conflict between two competing solidarities: a solidarity with Palestinians that activates memories of anticolonial resistance and global solidarity with the oppressed and a solidarity with the Israeli nation-state that grounds itself in memories of the Holocaust (Collins 2011, 147; Rothman and Zimmerman 2019, 9). However, while the call for BDS is a call for solidarity with the Palestinian *people* that is grounded in law, the Bundestag resolution's solidarity with Israel is a solidarity among *nation-states* that takes exception to the rule of law. While campaigns for BDS are attempts by civil society organisations at legal mobilisation "from below," aimed at ending Israel's occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands, the dismantling of the wall, equal rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the right of return of Palestinian refugees, the German government's solidarity with the Israeli state is grounded in extra-legal invocations of the exceptional concept of *Staatsräson* "from the top." While the BDS movement compares itself to a historical boycott movement with which it has a lot in common, the Bundestag resolution insists on an exceptional comparison between calls for BDS and a boycott with which it has almost nothing in common.

Various authors have argued that what the BDS movement is boycotting is ultimately the exception itself (Sivan and Laborie 2016, 137–40; Feldman 2019, 196–98). In its demand that Israel comply with international law, the BDS movement resists what Sivan and Laborie call "the Israeli model of the permanent state of exception justified by national security" (Sivan and Laborie 2016, 140). It is not surprising, then, that attempts to censor the BDS movement also take the form of exceptional measures. As a "mere act of parliament," the Bundestag's anti-BDS resolution is not actually legally binding (Gärditz 2020). However, it may be exactly its non-legally binding status that gives this resolution its political power to censor BDS activism, like the notorious 2016 "non-legally binding working definition of anti-Semitism" promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA 2016), which is cited

in the Bundestag's anti-BDS resolution as well.¹⁰ While presented as a non-legally binding "working" definition, the IHRA redefinition of anti-Semitism has been embraced by numerous public and semi-public bodies in various countries and has played an important role as "soft law" in facilitating the stigmatisation of critiques of Israel as anti-Semitic (Gould 2022; Neumann 2023). Both the IHRA "working definition" and the Bundestag's anti-BDS resolution are not "really" law, but it may be precisely this quasi-legal status that allows for their effective mobilisation against the constitutional rights of BDS activists. A state actor that has made ample use of the IHRA "working definition" of anti-Semitism and of the Bundestag's anti-BDS resolution in order to censor BDS activists is Felix Klein, the "Representative of the Federal Government for Jewish life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism." Klein's position was only created in 2018, and legal scholars have criticised the creation of this position as constitutionally problematic because it authorises a non-elected civil servant to intervene in public discourse on behalf of the German government (Gärditz 2020). Klein's position of "anti-Semitism representative" is yet another instance of an exceptional intervention in the freedom of speech, assembly, and thought.

It is important, then, to resist the Bundestag's attempt to foreclose associations and resonances between BDS and similar historical boycotts, as well as the Bundestag's legislation of exceptional associations between BDS and a boycott with which it has little in common, by interpreting BDS within the political history of boycott through concrete historical analysis and critical comparison. As historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti argued, such an interpretation involves a "examining the location of boycott within broader strategies of liberation unfolding at different historical junctures" (Takriti 2019, 59). Takriti cautions against an "[a]nalysis of boycott qua boycott [that] tells us little about the relationship between boycott and the actual struggles it is meant to serve," which risks "[p]rivileging the tactical form over the substantive principles underlying it, not to mention the material realities it is meant to alter" (Takriti 2019, 59). Especially in anticolonial contexts, Takriti argues, abstract analysis of boycott, for instance in social movement theory or in the "contentious politics

10 "According to the working definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities. Beyond that, the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity, can also be the target of such attacks." (Bundestag 2019)

framework,” risks depoliticisation and erasure of already marginalised voices (Takriti 2019, 59).

Takriti focuses on the genealogy of boycott in Palestinian politics, tracing lineages of Palestinian boycott back to boycotts in Ottoman Palestine against the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia in 1908 and against Zionist colonisation in the 1910s (Takriti 2019, 60). Takriti suggests that abstract analyses of “boycott qua boycott” are especially problematic in the context of Palestine, because boycott was in fact “at the core of the Zionist project in Palestine,” with its doctrines of “conquest of labor” and “Hebrew labour” that excluded Arab workers and “[shunned] Jews who did not participate in enforcing this exclusion” (Takriti 2019, 61). According to economist Shir Hever, the practice of boycotting Palestinian labour, “[a]lthough today officially illegal in Israel, still persists in thousands of Israeli businesses, which advertise their commitment not to employ Arab workers” (Hever 2013, 109). Takriti not only analyses Palestinian boycotts in the context of the Zionist boycott of Palestinian labour, but also in the context of the removal and subsequent denial of political rights for Palestinians.

This genealogy is important to recall because, as I mentioned at the beginning, BDS is a Palestinian-led movement that started with a call by more than 140 Palestinian civil society organisations. The Bundestag’s attempt to legislate a German national resonance for calls for BDS disavows the fundamental transnational or global nature of the BDS movement. Against this attempt to legislate an exceptional national boycott memory, critical comparison can open up space for foreclosed transnational resonances between BDS and boycotts against anti-democratic regimes elsewhere.

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PART 3

Slogans



The Cultural Lives of May 68 Slogans: From Walls to Pages

Zoé Carle

1 Introduction

The phrase “May 68: this tag will be legitimate in 50 years” is one of the many graffiti slogans that appeared during the French protest against the Law ORE (Orientation et Réussite des Etudiants/ Course Guidance and Success of Students) in May 2018.¹ Every social movement produces its share of such linguistic creations, but this one, photographed and posted on a social network, underlines the ambiguity of the cultural lives of protest tags and graffiti in a particularly interesting way.² Ironically, it was written on the rooftop of Nanterre University, an emblematic place for the May 68 student movement.³ At the time, the university hosted an exhibition dedicated to the general strike and had organised several events commemorating its 50th anniversary. As the university’s press kit explained: the event “Prop’osons” offered “an occasion to expand 68 in time and space, and to once again question our relationship to the city, work, politics, art, and collective action, from the point of view of the youth and at a generational crossroads” (Soixantehuit 2018). While these events were happening, students from Nanterre occupied university buildings to protest against neoliberal policies targeting French universities. In particular, students reacted to the exhibition of protest material by organizing unauthorised exhibitions of pictures and slogans on campus, showing the vitality of contemporary social movements, inheritors to the 68 general strike.

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- 1 The law, carried by the Minister of Higher Education of Research Frédérique Vidal, aimed in particular to reorganise admission in higher education. The law sparked debates and controversies, especially concerning the issue of university admissions selections and the details of the reform’s implementation.
 - 2 This graffiti has been photographed and posted on Twitter in May 2018, then collected on a Tumblr platform, which was called “La rue ou rien” (“The Street or Nothing”) in reference to a famous rap song by the French group “PNL” (“Le Monde ou Rien”, “The World or Nothing”).
 - 3 The 22 March movement was founded in Nanterre in 1968, which was of pivotal importance for the then-boiling French student movement.



FIGURE 8.1 “This tag will be legitimate in 50 years.” Vitalia, May 2018, Nanterre

May 68 has a special status in the French collective imagination and its cultural memory, as Kristin Ross (2005) has shown. It has been intensely commented on and remembered in French society as it is not only the greatest mass movement in France’s recent history and the most important strike of the worker movement, but also marks the only Western insurrection post-World War II (Ross 2005). Despite this, it has often been presented within the public space as a mere counter-cultural event, a celebration of individualism and hedonism (Ross 2005). Commemorations have played a central role in this process of mainstreaming the remembrance of May 68. Additionally, in each decade, new publications and public events have shaped the cultural history of May 1968, offering occasions both for the rediscovery of materials from the archives and their recreation altogether (Leblanc 2016).⁴

4 As shown by Audrey Leblanc, some pictures taken by Gilles Caron became iconic in later times thanks to the roles they played in public anniversaries, even though they were not

For the 50th anniversary of the uprising, at least nine cultural institutions organised exhibitions and events with various focuses.⁵ These exhibitions and their promotional materials were structured around visual ‘objects,’ thereby foregrounding the material mediation of the historical event of 68. Such objects included the posters produced by the collective of students, artists, and activists that became known as the “ex-Atelier populaire des Beaux-Arts” or simply “Atelier Populaire,” the graffiti photographed by famous photojournalists, and the mass of leaflets, banners, and signs produced by protesters themselves.⁶ French linguist Jean-Louis Calvet described these “revolutionary productions” as a special kind of popular folklore, marked by a specific political context and unprecedented scope of production (1968, 18). In discussing this revolutionary subculture, he pays special attention to the genre of revolutionary slogans, for which, he argued, May 68 constituted a watershed.

Before May 68, slogans were not generally recognised as poetic formulations. The word *slogan*, derived from *sluag-ghairn*, the word for “battle-cry of a clan” in Gaelic, immediately called to mind totalitarian techniques for manipulating crowds, advertising techniques, or catchwords used as part of military strategies. The slogans used in the May uprising completely reversed this authoritarian perception of slogans to the point that rhetorician Olivier Reboul came to define them as “anti-slogans” for their ability to make their reader think rather than impose coercion (1975, 93). The corpus of May 68 slogans has often been compared to literary or philosophical forms, and slogans have become a kind of literary genre, a minor literature in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, i.e. a collectively enunciated assemblage, immediately political and with the potential to “de-territorialize” (1975, 33-34). From this point of view, the slogans of May 68 mark an axiomatic shift

‘visible’ during the time of the event itself: “Au contraire d’une perception de ces images comme documentation des événements, partant comme archive, et à rebours du ‘mystère’ de la pérennité des icônes, celles-ci s’affirment comme des représentations culturelles qu’il importe en effet d’historiciser pour les comprendre” (2016).

- 5 The 50th anniversary was marked by a particular concern for putting things in perspective from a socio-historical point of view and not letting objects alone mediate the event (Filleule and Sommier 2018; Bantigny 2018; Gobille 2018). The effects of this concern can be seen in the exhibitions organised by various cultural institutions; for example, in the exhibition focusing on the archives of the police headquarters, the high administration, and the executive power, which privileges a historical reconstruction of the event over the movement’s revolutionary productions.
- 6 For the 50th anniversary, one could see an exhibition on rebellious iconography in the Fine Arts of Paris, one on the history of iconic photographs at the National Library, one on documentarist Chris Marker, initiator of the Ciné-Tracts at the French Cinémathèque, and an exhibition on the archives of power in the National Archives.

in the French appreciation of protest productions as cultural productions, and more specifically in the understanding of slogans as discursive forms.

In French, the word *slogan* designates a brief, striking formula, suitable for memorisation and collective chanting, a dialogical but non-dialogical form that draws its formal characteristics from its use in contexts of political and social action.⁷ This linguistic definition avoids the material and medial dimensions of slogans and treats them as text. In reality, a mere formal definition of slogans is problematic, since their appearance in the public domain is linked to heterogeneous discursive materials, such as leaflets, signs, graffiti, and collective chants. In the case of May 68, analysts have tended to think of slogans as written language, focusing mainly on two kinds of material sources: the graffiti spray-painted during the occupations of universities or along boulevards and the posters of the Atelier Populaire, which have become emblematic of the movement.⁸

As is often the case in revolutionary times, May 68 prompted a passionate general drive to collect and archive, in an effort to preserve the movement's creations, focusing specifically on slogans and graffiti. This chapter intends to go back to these material lives of slogans. It asks how slogans, as sensitising devices for struggle (Traïni 2009), have been archived and remembered, and what the consequences of this process have been for their conceptualisation as political formulas. In the first section, I will explore how the impulse to archive and collect slogans has been intricately tied to a specific perspective on the language of May 68, promoted by contemporary commentators and interpreters, which cast these political and poetic phrases in a new light. Subsequently, I will delve into the influence of different media on the archiving process, outlining how they contributed to the iconic status of these memorable catchphrases. I will conclude by investigating the various afterlives of these slogans, which continue to resonate both with mainstream culture and with current social movements.

7 This definition owes much to the definition of slogans proposed by the ethno-musicologist Jaume Ayats: "Dans ce cadre, qu'est-ce qu'un slogan? Une locution qui tire ses caractéristiques de l'usage effectif dans l'acte social : une locution proférée collectivement dans le cadre d'une forme d'autonomie linguistique, d'une transmission minimale 'd'information,' mais représentant la constitution et la force d'un groupe. D'où sa forme: message achevé, non ouvert au dialogue, qui agit toujours comme une citation en procès continu de recreation, chargé de références de groupe et apte au plaisir de la locution collective" (1992, 358).

8 As for the chanted slogans, few sound recordings exist today (source). One can hear them as the soundscape of the events in documentaries produced at that time (for example Klein 1978), but they have not been archived for their own sake.

2 The Dawning of Revolutionary Slogans: a New Kind of Literature?

May 68 shifted the understanding of protest writings, these so-called “deviant exposed writings” (Petrucci 1993) which defied the ubiquitous “*Défense d’afficher*.”⁹ These writings competed with the authoritarian monopoly on writing in the urban space and its epigraphic landscape, and had long been noticed only by the police gaze (Artières 2013b). Written in chalk, coal, or tar, graffiti was seen as illicit writing by hobos or louts. Much like the political slogans produced by militant groups, they were not deemed worthy of literary or artistic interest.¹⁰ Ranging from puns and jokes to literary or philosophical quotes – like the quote of Sade in the illustration above – or even lyrical assertions, the slogans of May 68 had nothing to do with this previous mode of wall-writing nor with the purely logistical and tactical watchwords theorised by revolutionary leaders like Lenin (1917). Instead, they were largely inspired by student subcultures marked by surrealist and, even more pronouncedly, situationist attitudes. Additionally, they established the figure of the “inscrivain” – a neologism first coined by Alain Jouffroy (1968) to describe those anonymous graffiti artists who write aphorisms that almost reach the status of literature.

In his famous article, “Writing the Event” (1968), Roland Barthes theorised that the “taking of the speech” – a conception modelled on the “taking of the Bastille” – was a key characteristic of the movement of May 68 (109). Barthes critically examined the comparison many contemporary commentators drew between what he called “wild speech,” i.e., the graffiti written by students, and high literature (1968, 110). At the time, this literary reception of protest slogans and graffiti seems to have been widespread among intellectual and literary circles, and above all among the avant-garde, where, since the advent of surrealism, “symbolic domination has relied ... on the association of an aesthetic radicality and a political radicality” (Gobille 2005, 74). Graffiti

9 This inscription can regularly be seen on walls in France, this is a provision of the law of July 29, 1881, which governs freedom of expression in France and prohibits illegal billposting.

10 They have actually drawn the attention of a few artists since the 1930s/1940s, as a possible literary and artistic practice for the avant-gardes : for example, *My inscriptions* of the surrealist Louis Scutenaire, presenting himself as the heir of Restif de la Bretonne (Scutenaire 1976; Restif de la Bretonne 1889) or the flyers and inscriptions by the surrealist and situationist movement ; in the field of visual arts, the collections of remarkable anonymous graphic signs by the photographer Georges Brassai (2016) ; or even as musical inspiration for the composer Harry Partch (1956). All three are examples of the beginning of an interest for those graphic signs from the artistic field, preparing the shift of perception with the counter-cultures and the student movements post-World War II.

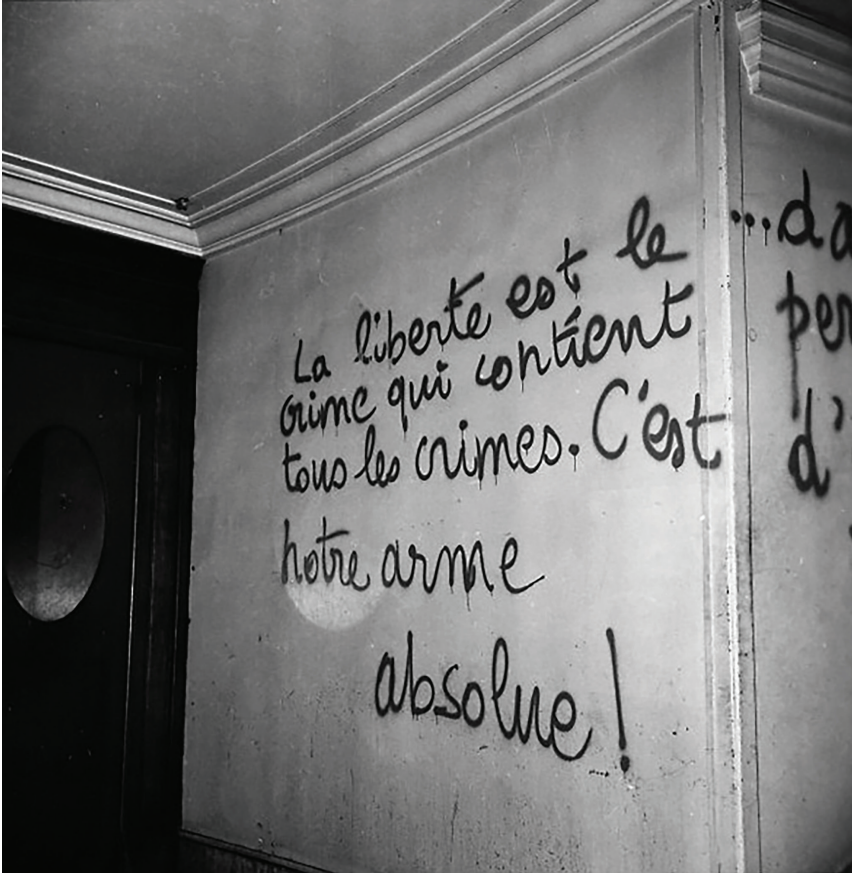


FIGURE 8.2 "Freedom is the crime of all crimes. It is our absolute weapon!" [La liberté est le crime qui contient tous les crimes. C'est notre arme absolue!]
 PHOTOGRAPH, 6 × 6 CM BNF, DÉPARTEMENT PHILOSOPHIE, HISTOIRE, SCIENCES DE L'HOMME, LB61-600 (TRACTS MAI 1968)

and slogans thus appeared to many authors as the realisation of the poet Lautreamont's instruction: "Poetry must be made by all and not by one" (cited in Combes 1983, 108). For those authors and intellectuals, the ideal of an anonymous and collective poetry thriving beyond the confines of books was suddenly personified in the graffiti adorning the streets of Paris.

This was the case, for instance, for Julio Cortázar. The Argentinian writer had settled in Paris and became an enthusiastic sympathiser and observer of the 68 movement: "When I came back from India and Iran, I landed in a fabulous Paris, in between barricades and student protests, surrounded by street poetry"

(2000, 1249). To give readers a glimpse of this living “speech,” he composed “Noticias del mes de mayo,” (Cortázar 1994) a collage in which he collected and translated all the “marvelous anonymous inscriptions written by students and workers in La Sorbonne, the Odeon, on the walls of the streets” (Cortázar 2000, 1249). Cortázar called the work “a news poem,” as he mixed an allegorical tale of the protest with a montage of quotes found in the streets and on the walls of La Sorbonne, sometimes in the original and sometimes in translation: “sean realistas, piden lo imposible”, “el sueño es realidad”, “mis deseos son la realidad”, “la revolución es increíble porque es verdadera”, “nous sommes tous des juifs allemands...” Naturally, these inscriptions were thoughtfully selected and, albeit loosely tethered to the historical context and the political intentions of May 68, all bore a distinct metaphorical connection to literary and creative themes, not just political demands. This wider resonance was facilitated by the juvenile humour characteristic of many inscriptions, which likely contributed to their broader dissemination beyond their original context of expression.

The surrealist and situationist intertext of these inscriptions played a substantial role in their literary reception, allowing them to develop into a sanctioned modern short form, comparable to the aphorism, maxim, and proverb. In 1968, François Caradec, a member of the artistic collective OuLiPo, published a collection of slogans under the title *La Chienlit de Papa*, which refers to a well-known protest linguistic coinage of 1968.¹¹ Contrary to what one would expect, the book does not present slogans from May 68 but instead describes as slogans a collection of aphorisms and *bons mots* from earlier centuries:

The total novelty of the May 1968 revolt is its writing. It is the permanent restoration: the words are free. Yet if the walls began to scream, wasn't this scream long tied in the throats? Because the words painted on the walls today were once printed (and signed) [...] in books. What seemed the mask of gratuitous violence and humour was often their true face. Suddenly rejuvenated, appearing today as new classics of the revolt, these words become proof the generations are adjoining. These slogans of the past would not be out of place today on the walls of today. The mess will always be the mess. (Caradec 1968, 3)

11 ‘Chienlit’ is a traditional French term that is often translated as ‘masquerade’ or ‘carnival/chaos.’ The term gained notoriety in May 68 due to it being used in a speech by General Charles de Gaulle during the student protests. He used the vernacular term as a playful wordplay, conveying the message “Reform yes, la chie-en-lit (shit in bed) no.”

In this introduction, one finds the usual stereotypical description of slogans rooted in aesthetic and philosophical considerations: they are connected to the freedom of living and wild words, and ‘the wall’ as the new scene of a literary creation freed from the classical hierarchy between elites and masses, presented as the meeting point of high-brow literature and popular creativity and, above all, depicted as a genre and form in which political and aesthetic radicality converge.

Barthes sums up those clichés about revolutionary inscriptions in the article mentioned above and underlines their main features:

‘Wild speech’, founded on ‘invention’, consequently and naturally meets the ‘discoveries’ of the form, the rhetorical shortcuts, the joys of the formula, in short the *joy of expression* (‘Il est interdit d’interdire’, etc.); very close to writing, this speech (which profoundly struck public opinion) logically took the form of *inscription*; its natural canvas was the wall, the fundamental space for collective writing. (1968, 109)

But, as he notes later on, the comparison between “wild speech” and “literature,” despite being very common, proved to be problematic both politically and literarily: “‘Wild speech’ was quickly eliminated, embalmed in the harmless pages of surrealist ‘literature’ and the illusions of ‘spontaneity’” (1968, 110). According to Barthes, the literary reception of this type of “speech” relied on the false impression that the statements had no utterer/speaker. Appearing to live lives of their own, the texts and graffiti fostered the impression that they embodied an epiphany of a People.¹²

Graffiti has indeed been treated as a homogenous corpus with a collective and distinctive ‘style’ that cannot be assigned to a singular author and evades archival logic. The apparent homogeneity of this overabundant and diverse corpus is determined by its graphic layout and aphoristic style. The mass use of aerosol spray in 1968 was new and replaced chalk and coal as tools of public writing. It may have contributed to the emergence of this style: a clumsy and “dirty” writing, signifying the deviant character of those exposed writings (Petrucci 1993), combined with a characteristic font style reminiscent of schoolchildren’s handwriting, which is still a lively tradition in French protest graffiti (ILLUSTRATION 3). In addition, many graffiti played on situationist

12 A similar remark has been made by the anthropologist of writing Béatrice Fraenkel about the effect on the reader led by the numerous inscriptions in the public space written after 9/11 in New York (2011) and more generally about the visibility of inscriptions: “a monumental subject” conveying the idea of popular sovereignty (1994, 108).

catchphrases – either through their phrasing or as verbatim quotations of Debord and other situationist's writings.¹³ Because of these two widely-shared characteristics, graffiti appears to exhibit a certain coherence, even though it is created by multiple writers acting in an uncoordinated manner.

As a whole, this corpus of anonymous and 'collective' slogans has been subjected to a process of cultural heritagisation to an unprecedented degree. According to Patrick Combes,

Those famous slogans of 1968 [...] have initiated this 'urban guerilla of the sign' in modern societies about which Baudrillard talks; contemporary par excellence, even if it is not new in itself, the graffiti carries, from Rome to the New York subway the speech of deviances. (1983, 115)

Not only did they meet the aesthetic aspirations of the historical avant-garde – poetry and art outside of the institutions, made by all – but they also anticipated a new artistic movement that would boom in New York in the following years – the *graffiti writing*. One might venture the hypothesis that the emergence of an aesthetic appreciation of deviant writing in the public sphere might be what opened up the possibility of their archiving, which met and in turn fostered the broader archival impulse typical of revolutionary events. Both anonymous and more famous *amateurs* dedicated themselves to the archiving of graffiti and slogans during May 68 and treated these writings as the precarious traces of a stillborn utopia.

2 The Textualisation and Iconisation of Slogans: Editorial Gestures and Photo-Texts

As political linguistic devices, slogans and graffiti are volatile. Moreover, in the case of protest slogans, the archivist's task is made even more difficult by the shifting contexts in which they are uttered. Unlike slogans produced by parties or governments, the author and origin of these phrases often cannot be identified. Their transmission and archiving is generally a matter of oral memory within activist communities and organisations, where contentious directories are continually updated to frame current cases or causes. In addition, archiving slogans poses crucial questions about their material status and medial existence: they can be collected as banners or posters, they can be captured

13 For the photographer Walter Lewino, the I.S. was in a certain way the major author of those slogans, in particular Christian Sebastiani (Meltz 2010).

as photographs or recorded as sound performances, or, in very rare cases, they can be archived as the written record of the protests through a process of textualisation.¹⁴ In this case, May 68 slogans have been archived in three ways: through photographs and videos of the writings and chants, through the conservation of the posters and leaflets – mainly the ex-Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts posters – and, unprecedentedly, by the textualisation of slogans in edited collections.

3 The Posters of the Ex-Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts

In the case of the posters, the desire to collect appeared as soon as the first posters were printed, as Michel Wlassikoff (2008) has pointed out. However, within the ex-Atelier populaire des Beaux-Arts, the artistic recovery of materials used in the struggle was immediately met with scrutiny.¹⁵ In fact, as Wlassikoff points out, the groups in charge of producing the posters were carefully overseen to ensure that the posters did not end up in collectors' boxes rather than on city walls. It was only at the end of the protest that a complete set was given to Georges-Henri Rivière, the founder of the Musée des Arts et traditions populaires. This decision was consistent with the practice of the Atelier, where all aesthetic and material aspects of production were carefully considered according to political and ideological positions.¹⁶ Besides intentionally designing how this collective work was carried out, students and participants of Beaux-Arts

14 The word is generally used in relation to oral poetry and epics, ranging from Antiquity to the modern age (Ong 1983; Honko 2000).

15 Beyond the ex-Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, many students groups rejected the archiving and collections of protest material, regarding it as a form of institutionalization and culturalisation of the struggle. It is the case of the C.R.A.C. (Comité Révolutionnaire d'Agitation Culturelle) answering to the comité de rédaction de la revue *Le Mouvement social* who was looking for 'documents' to illustrate their special issue of July-September 1968 *La Sorbonne par elle-même*: "Rejecting university culture, this revolution rejected its forms. No manifestos – "we can't write," says a C.R.A.C. poem – even fewer lectures, few speeches (C.R.A.C. has nothing but contempt for the "morons of verbiage"), but, in the inspiration of the moment, posters, graffiti, hoaxes, poems. Finally, an extreme reluctance to 'preserve,' the prelude to respect, to the mortal history [?] that transforms life into destiny, to the recuperative publication, has made 'archives' even scarcer. From the C.R.A.C. we have none. The cultural revolution is spread out on the walls, not piled up in files" (Perrot et al. 1968).

16 As Wlassikoff points out, there were many Maoists among the participants of the ex-Atelier. This had political as well as aesthetic implications for the protest materials, as some, for example, had a preference for aphorisms and/or the graphic forms of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Wlassikoff 2008).

had carefully thought through the recognisable ‘style’ of the posters to be direct, striking, and easily readable by most people. In doing so, they created a ‘style of struggle’ that has been replicated in other international movements. Despite the presence of well-known creators, however, the posters were never signed. This norm of anonymity has been scrupulously maintained over time:

The protagonists of the Atelier’s decision to maintain their anonymity signals a rare fidelity to their original principles [...] Above all, anonymity had been created to serve ideological motives: the rejection of the notion of authorship, the materialisation of the ‘educating power of the people,’ posters as a concrete example of art in service of the masses [...] The posters of May 68 were thus transformed into a single emanation of one and the same collective body, the Fine-Arts-students, the quintessence of the movement. This despite the fact that it was essentially professional visual artists, often already politically engaged, who had launched the process and taken care of most of the production. (Wlassikoff 2008, 21)

The choice to use artisanal screen printing was based on the same considerations. This method was quite restrictive considering the technical and aesthetic abilities of the participants, but it allowed a great economy of means and speed of production, consistent with the motto displayed on the wall of the Atelier: “Sincerity is preferable to technique” (Wlassikoff 2008, 12).

Despite the Atelier’s wariness of artistic fetishisation, with the end of the movement and the celebration of its contentious iconography, the posters were given a second, commercial life, as a number of them sold at auction. Wlassikoff comments on the rising price of the posters, observing: “The peak seems to have been reached in 1988, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary; creations such as ‘CRS SS’, ‘De Gaulle-Hitler’, ‘Retour à la normale’ or ‘Vermine fasciste’ fetched 3,000 francs at auction in Paris; [while] in 2007, excellent silkscreens remained available on the Internet for around 150 euros” (2008, 22).

4 Photo-Texts: Graffiti and Inscriptions

The inscriptions were initially mainly collected and circulated through images. These included photographs as well as short, anonymous films that were produced during the movement, which became known as “cine-tracts.” Many photographers captured the writings of the movement, whether as part of the background of urban scenes – like in the famous picture by Cartier-Bresson which caught the piece “Jouissez sans entrave” (“Play [frolic] without fetters”)



FIGURE 8.3 “I participate, you participate.” Ex-atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts ILLUSTRATED POSTER. 47.5 × 37 CM. FONDS NOVAK ZVONIMIR, COLL. LA CONTEMPORAINE AM1297A11

– or as the main subject, a novelty of May 68 which quickly became cliché. This was the case, for example, in Elie Kagan’s photographs of banners and leaflets, whose efforts led historian Philippe Artières to nickname him the “chief archivist of the banners” (Artières 2013a, 63). The spray-painted graffiti was also a major subject for photographers like Walter Lewino and Jo Schnapp (1968).

Lewino later described how the idea of collecting the graffiti came up:

events. The book displays their photographs of graffiti and formulas with an accompanying text that provides context and some critical commentary: “These ephemeral signs – most of which were erased or covered over in the days that followed – bear witness to the raw state of what was above all a moral awakening. ... We are adding them to the great file of revolutionary imagery” (Lewino and Schnapp 1968, 7). The intentions behind the act of archiving can be numerous: to bear witness, to enable historical writing or even to attest to one’s presence in the movement. In the case of Lewino, the desire to bear witness in order to counteract any form of erasure predominates. Accordingly, the photographs record not only ‘literary’ or ‘philosophical’ inscriptions, but also sentences that appear to be more trivial.

It is thus at the intersection of texts and images, through so-called “committed phototexts” (Foucher Zarmanian and Nachtaergal 2020) or “verbal photographs” (Dahmani 2021) that slogans became cultural heritage. Slogans were not only archived as popular literature but also as a visual medium. Black and white photography and its manner of archiving have consecrated this combination of visual and textual semantic features in the cultural memory of the protest of May 68 (Leblanc 2016). Stylistically, for example, one can note the superabundance of chiasmus and parallelism, evocative of situationist composition. Visually, the schoolkid script which appeared on black and white pictures reflects the signature style of those “engaged phototexts” typical of May 68 (Nachtaergal and Foucher-Zarmanian). The cine-tracts produced by the collective SLON have also played an active part in the making of this polysemiotic visuality. These very short silent movies, mixing texts, videos, drawings and photographs, were broadcast among associations and activist networks to spread news from a counter-mediatic perspective in order “to protest, propose, shock, inform, interrogate, assert, convince, think, shout, laugh, denounce, cultivate” (SLON 1968). Playing on a principle of counterpoint between text and image, shots of writing were fundamental to this peculiar cinematographic form. While the scope of their production and diffusion was in keeping with their ambitions as agitprop, they also constituted long-term archives. Produced by avant-garde directors, cine-tracts soon found their place in the cultural history of May 68 as it was being written.

5 Texts and Books

To combat the erasure of the writings and the fading of the revolutionary spirit of May 68, Julien Besançon, a journalist who reported on the student protests, published his book *Les murs ont la parole* in July of the same year. This small

book had a print run of 70,000 copies and became one of the best-selling books about the movement. In the work, slogans and graffiti are reproduced in a page layout that imitates a Chinese *dazibao* (or ‘wall-newspaper’). Aside from the letter height, the typography is relatively classic and does not imitate the famous schoolkid script that characterised the May 68 inscriptions. The compilation is presented as “quotations collected by Julien Besançon.” An introductory text presents graffiti writers as authors and their inscriptions as a collective work that is at risk of disappearing:

The graffiti itself became freedom. And how many sincere individuals wrote ‘I have nothing to write’: they were not naive. They shouted to ‘feel with’ others, a celebration of anonymity and participation. Those who quoted did not sign, thus attaching the author to circumstances. But these cries still created: from the nail on the chalkboard, from the lime-wash on cinderblock, and from the ink on paper, negating politics, challenging philosophy, aesthetics, and poetry. A vertical forum, a democracy of crossing out: the additions, the responses established a dialogue. (Besançon 1968, 3)

The archiver intends to fight oblivion and creates a paradoxical monument to the polyphonic bursts of creativity brought about by the revolt. Historian Valérie Tesnière has pointed out a similar desire among members of the Paris Commune in 1870 when communards wished to collect posters and bear witness in order to fight against any falsifications of the movement, thereby observing how “a form of acute ‘collectionitis’ [emerged] on the part of witnesses who wanted to do justice to its actions or, on the contrary, denounce its excesses” (2012, 11). Nevertheless, Besançon’s initiative is remarkable, since it may well have been the first occasion that slogans and graffiti were collected as text. This textualisation was likely prepared for by the literary appreciation of those inscriptions, paving the way for editorial gestures like Besançon’s.

In the years that followed, for each commemoration, various edited collections of slogans appeared. Additionally, the archival initiatives that followed May 68 showed a similar concern as Besançon: a desire to remember that which, by the end of the movement, was already at risk of being erased in order to testify to the remarkable aspect of the protest. Over time, however, the aesthetic quality of these slogans, foregrounded by lovers of aphorisms, began to compete with their testimonial quality, emphasised by the protest’s sympathisers (Les Enragés anonymes 1998; Pagès 1998; Legois 2008; Langlois 2008). Nevertheless, the constitution of a corpus of May 68 slogans owes a lot to these miscellaneous collections that were published every decade. While

these collections' semblance of coherence was already an artificial invention at the time of the inscriptions' appearance, it has only been reinforced by these various publications, which maintain an increasingly loose connection to activist archiving practices.

In the introduction to his book *No copyright* (1998) editor and author Yves Pagès reflected on the risks of fetishisation inherent to gestures of homage, especially within the context of a movement that fundamentally resists all forms of institutionalisation. In 1998, polemics around the political and historical meaning of May 68 were still at the heart of its commemoration, even though the mainstreaming of the event had greatly contributed to its depoliticisation. Pagès underlines this aspect in the brief text introducing the compilation, observing: "Three decades have been enough to turn May 68 into a kitschy non-event, a vague sound and light show for ex-sixties fans" (1998, 10). The compilation itself consists of a reproduction of an unpublished manuscript, which meticulously documents transcription of the graffiti written during the occupation of the Sorbonne by anonymous collectors – among whom the editor's mother who found the typescript by chance. Following in Besançon's footsteps, the editor claims to want to keep alive the political memory of the events without monumentalising them, thus stressing the 'documentary' quality of this publication.

Still, even when editors face the problems inherent to the collection process head-on, the writings inevitably change in status as they move from street walls to book pages. Indeed, the process of textualisation results in a deterritorialisation as it erases the discursive devices, the materialities and the context of enunciation, and solely emphasises its content. Such a process of transformation was in some ways facilitated by the formal properties of slogans, which, as aphorisms, exist, linguistically speaking, as "detached utterances" or "phrases without texts" (Maingueneau 2012, 3). These formal aspects grant many rhetorical advantages: slogans are catchy, easy to remember, and do allow for response—because of that, they can be compared to a coup in speech. Last but not least, these linguistic qualities promote slogans' circulation, even into books, and a loosening of their relation to the original context, or co-text, of enunciation.

Other collections of May 68 slogans – like the one by Jean-Philippe Legois (2008), for example— do away completely with this documentary approach and present their text instead as a miscellany of *bons mots*. Between these opposing approaches to collecting, slogans thus morph into documents, echoes of past struggles, fragments of the event's threatened memory, and phrases for meditation and contemplation. The appearance of those little books of slogans was in itself a new phenomenon within the language of contention:

treated as a whole, as a corpus, the ephemeral May 68 inscriptions managed to transcend their precarious origins and even inspire the production of other slogans – new inscriptions that are distant in time, but completely shaped by their distinctive ‘style.’

6 Cultural and Political Memory: the Afterlives of May 68 Slogans

In 2008, among the various books published for the 50th anniversary of May 68, one could have found a small memoir titled *Pourquoi j’ai écrit: sous les pavés, la plage* (*Why I Wrote: Under the Cobblestones, the Beach*). In the book, the author, Bernard Cousin, asserts ownership of the well-known graffiti and explains the motives behind this claim. The revindication of the issue of ‘authorship’ with regard to this graffiti is a clear departure from the norms of anonymity that prevailed in its original revolutionary context.¹⁷ The ‘inscrivain’ has become an ‘author’ who claims his rights over what have become collective sentences and symbols. Such a claim is difficult to verify, all the more so because slogans are collective and anonymous formulas whose aesthetic quality relies on their repetition and reuse of other texts (Carle 2019). As such, their mode of production reflects and encourages slogans’ recuperation and reuse in other contexts and demonstrates why they cannot be attributed to a single author. This book is an outlier since it not only considers the May 68 slogans as a collective heritage to be remembered but also underlines the *value* these writings have acquired over time.

“May 68 in 10 unforgettable slogans” was the title of an article published in the women’s magazine *Elle* in May 2018. The slogans selected by the editors resonate with the modern-day reader quite differently than with their original audience: “Be realistic, demand the impossible;” “Imagination in power;” “Make love, not war;” “Under the cobblestones, the beach;” “I don’t want to spend my life earning a living;” “It is forbidden to forbid;” “Beauty is in the street;” “Let’s take our desires for reality;” “Don’t take the elevator, take the power;” “Get angry.” Written in black on a white background, completely detached from their original context of enunciation, the slogans seem to evoke ideas linked to self-help or individual emancipation rather than political issues. This impression is reinforced by mainstream interpretations of May 68 as an individualistic and hedonistic counter-cultural movement. Thus, even though the interpretation

17 It is not insignificant that Yves Pagès, who positions himself as a political heir to the movement, titled his collection *No Copyright*, as an homage to the idea of a collective creation with no author.

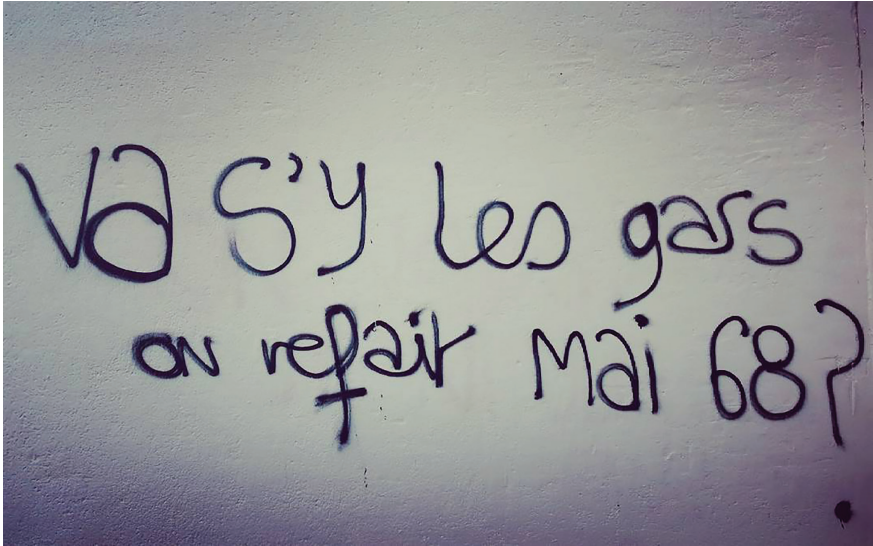
of May 68 is generally framed by the polemics around the event's commemoration, its slogans appear to lead a cultural life all of their own.

Much like references to May 68 in contemporary social movements more generally, the depoliticisation of the slogans has affected their recall and reuse by activists. The diverse uses of May 68 in activist memory-building show a remarkable ambiguity, which is indicative of the movement's uncertain status in collective memory. May 68 appears unavoidable, but, as Barthes would put it, is "wrapped in the harmless folds of literature" and of revolutionary folklore. In May 2018, for example, references to May 68 in the student mobilisation and its inscriptions were numerous and sometimes contradictory.

For obvious timing reasons, fantasies of a replay of the general strike of 68 occurred side by side with criticisms of the strike's cultural recuperation by the institutions. This tension between different attitudes towards the movement was amplified by the fact that the student occupation was unfolding in the same iconic universities like Nanterre.

From sentences to inscriptions to archives to cultural symbols, the afterlives of May 68 slogans follow the chaotic path of the movement's own diverse afterlives. Whether as documents, archives, proof, or symbols, these slogans have been mobilised as arguments in the controversies and public debates following this notorious episode in French history. As Kristin Ross has shown, the emphasis on the discursive creativity of the movement has played a big role in the ambiguous afterlives of May 68 and the contested memory of the event: "The interpretations of May 68, notably those of Lipovetsky, favored graffiti over all other texts or documentary evidence. Summarising the slogans of May 68 in poetic expressions such as 'Il est interdit d'interdire' or 'Sous les pavés la plage' considerably facilitated their integration into a vision of society of the 1980s, liberated from all conflicts and confrontations" (2005, 197).

From this point of view, the graphic and linguistic productions of May 68 appear to be realising May 68 activists' worst fear. The most obvious case in question is the posters of the ex-Atelier Populaire, which quickly became iconic and have now been used in very all sorts of different contexts, from interior decoration to commercial campaigns. In 2003, the Leclerc supermarket chain used the protest iconography of May 68 in their advertising to campaign against the high cost of living. Drawing on their graphic symbols – the CRS raising his baton, the raised fist, etc. – and linguistic formulas – 'fight against', 'everybody against'... – the advertisers had no trouble rerouting the slogans' mobilising strength for commercial use. From a linguistic standpoint, the recognisable expressions and syntactic constructions operate similarly to the graphic symbols; they simultaneously activate the memory of the entire slogans and distort their original meaning by being transposed into another



FIGURES 8.5 AND 8.6 Two contradictory references to May 68. “Let’s go guys for a new May 68?” / “We don’t give a shit about May 68, let’s do 1789.” Liroquoise, published on “La rue ou rien.

context with different pragmatic aims. As analysed by Benjamin Delalande, this phenomenon of reuse affects many social practices: “In an eternal recycling of social practices, advertising absorbs the criticism directed towards it through critiques of consumer society, in order to revalorise itself within a meta-discourse” (2012).

This metabolisation of the cultural aspects of a political struggle by consumer society is particularly visible in French recent history. But, seen in a different light, it also marks the success of those sensitising tools and in particular of the establishment of new languages of struggle. By building on the worker movement and Marxist tradition, which have always integrated symbolic and ideological visuals into their struggle, the movement of 1968 marked a shift in communication strategies and linguistic action repertoires. The feminist movements of the 1970s may well be the most direct heirs to these playful and ironic styles of struggle (App et al. 2011), but the new social movements of the late 20th and early 21st century are just as much part of this lineage: movements defending minority rights, the alter-globalisation movement and the green movement have all adopted the same communication strategies and linguistic innovations (Neveu 2019). The linguistic dimensions of political activism



FIGURE 8.7 “We are nothing, we want everything” [Nous ne sommes rien, nous voulons tout]
ZOÉ CARLE, MARSEILLE, MARS 2019

are influenced by various considerations: linguistic strategies are, of course, intended to appeal to people, to present the struggle in a positive light, and to evoke emotions, but also to respond to the dominant ideology itself, including the symbols and the narratives it promotes. From this perspective, slogans and graffiti can be seen to operate as alternative narratives and symbols, even though they remain susceptible to later appropriations. In any case, linguistic creations are meticulously crafted within new social movements, and they are now an integral part of repertoires of action (Neveu 2019; Felstiner et al. 1991). These repertoires are continually refreshed, not least through the sociotechnical innovations that enable their dissemination (Tufcecki 2017), yet they also remain rooted in the same expressivist and humorous spirit opened up by the slogans of May 68.

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Contestatory Memory Work: Reading Political Slogans in the South African Communist Left

Corinne Sandwith

1 Introduction

This chapter explores the capacity of political slogans to activate protest through the recollection of activist or traumatic pasts. It draws attention to the “activist memory work” (Merill, Keightley and Daphi 2020) of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in the early twentieth century and focuses on the forms of protest rhetoric which characterised its multilingual newspaper, *Umsebenzi* (April 1930 – May 1936). Set within a broader inquiry into the workings of contestatory memory in colonial contexts, it asks what memories and associations were solicited by the “language of contention” (Tarrow 2013) on the Communist Left, reflecting in particular on the kinds of memory work prompted by the use of resonant keywords such as “Mayibuye,” “Afrika,” “slavery” and “Abyssinia.” It also reaches beyond the mnemonic capacity of single words to identify the potential of the language of political slogans to activate latent narratives through their reliance on modes of narrative emplotment and considers their significance for the ways in which activist pasts, presents and futures have been imagined. The chapter foregrounds a postcolonial approach to the language and politics of Communist memory cultures. It seeks to reframe conventional readings of Communist memory work as normative, ossified and authoritarian by highlighting the distinctive forms of anti-colonial Leftist memory mobilisation that took shape in early twentieth century South Africa. I link this exploration of the language and emplotments of Communist memory cultures to recent concerns with the dominance of trauma in cultural memory studies and conclude with a brief reflection on the implications of writing a history of leftist memory-rhetoric in the postcolonial present.

Whilst memory studies scholarship has only recently turned to the memory-activism nexus (Rigney 2018; Daphi and Zamponi 2019; Berger et al. 2021; Gutman et al. 2023), the history of African anti-colonial discourse demonstrates the long-recognised imbrications of memory and activism; contestatory memory work, in its ongoing engagements with the rationalisations of state-sanctioned memory, has been a central arena of political contention for

a range of anti-colonial movements. The historical fact of territorial occupation generated immediate conflicts over the nature of the past, what should be remembered, how and why. For this reason, the dominant memory regimes in colonial contexts have been subject to heightened, early and ongoing contestation, such that revisionist memory of various kinds emerged as a key gesture in various anti-colonial traditions. As Ruramisai Charumbira argues, “What we now think of as memory activism, has been the *modus operandi* of the enslaved and the colonized whose very Otherness from the Western European norm produced unjust democratic societies of slaves and masters – by color, race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, and sexuality” (2023, 450). And on the centrality of colonial violence for activist memory, Julia C. Wells writes, “It would be hard to find any memory activism in Africa that does not in one way or another relate to its colonial past” (2023, 207). As these comments suggest, recollection of the colonial past is at the heart of all anti-colonial and decolonial memory work, a practice which is incited by the long history of trauma and structural exclusion.

This chapter reads the history of activist memory work on the South African Communist Left via three key political slogans: “Africa Return!”/“Mayibuye iAfrika!” “Down with the Slave Laws” and “Hands off Abyssinia!” As in other activist contexts, both historical and in the present, political slogans provided a central focus of mobilisation and protest for the CPSA which, in the 1930s – while subject to increased Comintern scrutiny and often paradoxical, top-down directives – struggled to build a workers’ movement in a racialised context. At the same time, it also attempted to respond to the particular conditions of South African racial-capitalism and its central symbol, the South African mining industry (Drew 2002, 2007; Roth 2016; Lodge 2022). I trace the language of dissent in the Communist Left in the pages of its flagship newspaper, *Umsebenzi*, focusing in particular on the 1930s period when the twin political projects of the defence of workers’ rights and anti-colonialism were aligned and reinforced in new ways; this, partly in response to intensifying discrimination in South Africa but also in reaction to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. In *Umsebenzi*, political slogans formed a staple feature of frontpage headlines, news articles, letters to the editor, community dispatches, political cartoons and protest notices. In evidence here is the particularly intensive remediation, and back-and-forth reciprocity, of popular slogans as they migrated to and from the newspaper text via contemporary political posters, banners, songs, chants, speeches and pledges. Political slogans take on additional resonance in the form of visual representation through the frequent publication of political cartoons (linocut prints by Edward Roux) such that their full meaning emerges in the interactive nexus of word and image.

As is suggested, the contestatory memory work inspired by these slogans and their visual elucidations is not confined to the efforts of party leadership but is best understood as an active, everyday practice.

Umsebenzi newspaper, previously entitled *The South African Worker*, had its origins in *The International*, founded by the International Socialist League in 1915. It was initially published as an irregular monthly. However, with the name change in April 1930, an attempt was made to move to a weekly publication. According to Edward Roux, author of the first history of Black resistance struggles in South Africa, *SA Worker/Umsebenzi* was the “most widely read” of Black newspapers during this period (1966, 232). It operated on a shoe-string budget but was able to hold its own in a context dominated by politically moderate commercial publications.¹ In keeping with the CPSA’s late 1920s decision to shift its emphasis to the formation of an “independent black South African Republic” as a stage towards socialist revolution (cited in Lodge 2022, 120), the paper made a “sustained effort ... to translate the ideas of the social revolution” into an African idiom (Roux 1966, 232).² It was in this context, as Roux suggests, that the slogan “Mayibuye” “became the battle cry of the publication” (1966, 232).³

Memory has been a key political resource for activists on the South African Communist Left and a central arena of its political work. The routine, quotidian use of memory is evident in insistent, repetitive calls to remember – “Kumbulani!” (*Umsebenzi* 23 May 1930, 5) – as a basis for ongoing political action. Communist organisations across the world are known to have followed an explicit yearly calendar of commemoration; these forms of serial, ritualised remembrance referenced the solidarities of Internationalist politics (May Day as the most obvious) as well as marking local historical events (such as South Africa’s Dinga’s Day). As the South African context also demonstrates, activist memory work in colonial contexts also took shape as the refusal to participate in particular days of remembrance designed to legitimise the colonial order (such as, for example, the commemoration of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope in 1642).⁴ Alongside the gesture of commemorative refusal were those occasions in which annual commemorations of the defeat of indigenous people – such as Dinga’s Day – were appropriated

1 In 1940, the paper was re-named *Inkululeko* (*Freedom*).

2 For details on the controversial slogan (also termed the ‘Native Republic’ slogan), see Lodge (2022, 116–170).

3 See Switzer and Switzer (1979, 77–79).

4 For more details, see Witz (2003).

and reconfigured as days of anti-colonial political protest.⁵ Gestures of this kind are evidence of ‘proprietary’ competitions over the meaning of the past (Cossu 2011, 387), and testament to the power of the radical imagination to reinvent established meanings. This revolutionary calendar is articulated by the periodic rhythms of the newspaper form itself, both in the pre-mobilisation period as well as in reports on the events of the day and their aftermaths. As such, the calendric temporality of the newspaper format is closely aligned with the memorial marking of days.

Remembrance serves as an important rallying point for political mobilisation, in part because of its powerful affective resonance; its ability to conjure feelings of loss, trauma, euphoria, vindication and rage. Activist memory work in *Umsebenzi* also registers an important cognitive dimension, drawing on both Marxist historical materialism and Lukácsian notions of the “totality” (1965). Recollection, as per these conceptual traditions, is key to the practice of joining the dots, of making sense of isolated events and phenomena in an attempt to reveal systemic patterns and relations. Styles of reportage in *Umsebenzi* are repetitive, recursive and accumulative, linking present atrocities to former violence, thus narrating a diachronic litany of events. In its narration of repetitive and unrelenting violence, *Umsebenzi* sought repeatedly to foreground a deep history of similar actions, thereby confirming a continuum of violence rather than novelty. These forms of narrative emplotment register neither a rise and fall trajectory, nor a restoration of balance, but a flat-line of continuous repetition and more of the same.

A reading of political slogans in *Umsebenzi* newspaper in the 1930s suggests two key “sites of memory” (Nora 1997) for continuing activism. The first is the intergenerational memory of uncolonized space for which Abyssinia, prior to the Italian invasion in 1935, provides a powerful symbol. The second is the long history of slavery, both in its world-historical and local South African manifestations. As is evident, these represent more inchoate or non-specific forms of memory-orientation which contrast sharply with the more obviously commemorable and spectacular incidents of civic uprising and massacres (Rigney 2016, 89). The character of Communist political slogans would seem to confirm that events which take place over a longer temporal frame and which record ‘slower’ and more incremental forms of violence (Nixon 2011) have been as important for contestatory memory work in African colonial contexts as more obviously ‘commemorable’ events.

5 For details, see Ndlovu (2000).

The intensity of activist memory work on the South African Communist Left highlights the importance of making distinctions between forms of Left-leaning memory mobilisation which are determined to harness the past for revolutionary purposes and those more atrophied or normative forms of memory work – often associated with the Soviet Union – which seek to legitimise current regimes and rewrite the past for present interests. Such distinctions complicate assumptions that communism, in its forward-march teleology, attributed little value to the past (Assmann 2023, 1–2). In this chapter, I ask when and in what contexts, the past was mobilised on the Communist Left in South Africa, as well as how and for what purposes. The argument highlights the importance of situated readings of Communist memory culture and of giving weight to the distinctive forms of activist memory work which emerged in the context of anti-colonial struggles. Key to this approach to the memory-activism nexus is a reading of the specific forms of contestatory language which arose in this context and through which a Leftist-anti-colonial memory project was defined.

2 Slogans as Narrative Emplotment

The current interest in “language as a medium of memory” (see van den Elzen’s introduction to this volume, 6) directs attention to the constitutive function of language in the cultural formation of memory. With respect to the mnemonic potential of political slogans, it highlights their figurative, tonal, lexical, dialogic, rhythmic and aural dimensions. In addition, the focus on language as medium gives space to the implications of language choice, acts of translation and code-switching. The political slogans associated with the Communist Left in South Africa, whether in print or oral form, were either selectively or simultaneously rendered in a range of languages, including isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, English and Afrikaans. In this way, activist utterances – over and above whatever else they might have achieved – also involved a performance of visible translation and multi-lingualism, both of which had considerable counter-hegemonic potential.⁶ Read as “speech acts of protest” (Hill 2018, 9), the political slogans of the South African Communist Left can be divided into three main types: the language of prophecy/invocation (“Africa Return!”/“Mayibuye iAfrika!”); the language of denunciation/critique (“Down with Passes!”; “Down with the Slave Laws!”/“Makapela Namapasi!”) and the language of command (“Hands

⁶ For similar gestures in the context of Palestinian-Israeli solidarity groups, see Tamar Katriel (2020).

off Abyssinia!”). Like many utterances of this kind, these protest slogans have both perlocutionary force and illocutionary aspirations: if slogans potentially initiate protest action by recalling particular forms of social injustice (the loss of a continent; the injustice of racial-capitalism, the spectacle of colonial conquest and slavery) and imagining alternatives, they also hold out the hope of bringing what is named into being (Butler 2017, 173; Hill 2018, 36–41).

Further to the question of language, this chapter demonstrates that a particular affordance of the political slogan is its ability to function as hyper-compressed or synecdochal narrative in which an expansive historical past is distilled into a single resonant word or phrase. This reading of the mnemonic investments of protest slogans as forms of narrative emplotment sheds light on the particular habits of framing the past in anti-colonial memory work, on the narrative templates through which memories have been shaped and organised (romance, melodrama, tragedy and so on), and on the relationships between past, present and future that these narrative structures assume. With the exception of Ann Rigney’s work on the history of Bloody Sunday commemorations (2016), memory-activism scholarship has not yet given conspicuous attention to the ways in which cultural memories are also shaped by the narrative templates that subtend them.⁷ Drawing on Peter Brooks’s influential notion of the “melodramatic imagination,” Rigney reads the striking commemorability of Bloody Sunday atrocities in relation to the resonant melodramatic figure of the “interrupted feast.” As an “event type” that combines both “victimhood and agency,” the “civic massacre” records the spectacle of unanticipated violence against ordinary citizens who have gathered on the streets in order to exercise the basic rights of a modern democracy. It therefore “dramatises and makes manifest a moral configuration where innocence is pitted against culpability, right against might, citizenry against the state, hope against destruction” (2018a, 60).

I amplify this reading of the narrative emplotments of memory by foregrounding the implicit plot structures of some of the key political slogans popularised by the South African Communist Left and consider their significance for the politics of anti-colonial memory. I draw on David Scott’s reading in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) of anti-colonial rhetoric as a species of romance narrative, one in which history unfolds via an implacable moral opposition between aggressor and righteous victim. The anti-colonial romance, in its least nuanced forms, favours an irresistible teleology of

⁷ See Katriel (2020) on the genre of “moral shock narratives” in her discussion of Israeli soldier witness testimony. On the role of “schematic narrative templates” in the formation of “deep memory,” see James V. Wertsch (2008, 142).

heroic overcoming and directs a reading of the past as that which must be transcended. While recognising its political and affective valence in the anti-colonial period, Scott registers doubt about the “continued critical purchase of the poetics of anti-colonial Romance” in the postcolonial present (2004, 135). As he suggests, it is difficult to sustain a reading of the colonial past in terms of romantic overcoming in an historical context in which the futures that these discourses imagined have long since fallen into ruin.

Rejecting the uncritical recapitulation of the “reverential anti-colonial story,” which often highlights the actions of heroic individuals, Scott argues that the relationship between the colonial past, the postcolonial present and its imagined futures needs to be plotted in new ways (168). This, he argues, requires a shift from the narrative arc of Romance to that of tragedy. In the mode of Romance, “history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm.” Tragedy, by contrast, takes shape as a “broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck” (13). By “interrupting the teleologies of Romance and focusing our attention on the paradoxical inscriptions of the past within the present, on the persistence of contingencies within freedom, on the intransigence of failure within success, tragedy may help us better than Romance to cope with so unyielding a postcolonial present as our own” (168–169). This approach allows for an understanding of activist histories – and the utopian aspirations for better-ness that they inscribe – not in terms of linear teleology but rather as unfinished business, while also making it possible to contemplate a reading of the ‘redeemed’ present which includes the persistence of violence and suffering.⁸

Scott’s distinction between romantic and tragic remembrance, and his insistence that scholars take cognisance of the particular vantage points from which these histories are observed, have been particularly useful in formulating an approach to the politics and poetics of memory in South Africa. As Enzo Traverso’s exploration of “Left-wing melancholia” after the collapse of Communism attests, these ideas have application beyond the postcolonial context (2016). In a partial echo of Traverso’s argument, Jeremy Matthew Glick’s reading of the “Black Radical Tragic” provides a means to circumvent what might be seen as a potentially reductive opposition between ‘romance’ and ‘tragedy’ and the dangers of the de-historicised reading of these terms as abstract universals

8 Note, by way of contrast, David Johnson’s (2023, 181) point about the conservative uses of didactic tragedy which aims to “warn/ educate/ admonish those contemplating anti-colonial resistance.”

(Glick 2016, 144–147). Glick’s formulation of the “Black Radical Tragic” – which draws its impetus from various stage representations of the Haitian Revolution – argues for an understanding of aesthetic form and political praxis that encompasses both the “subjective experience of loss” and the material-political structures that “place Black life under duress” (213).

Popular political slogans of the late 1920s and early 1930s track a number of different narrative possibilities that include heroic overcoming in the mode of the anti-colonial Romance, tragic intimations of repetitive structural violence, suffering, abjection and doom, as well as the call for Africa to ‘return,’ a prophetic narrative of restoration of what has been lost which invokes melancholic longing and unfinished futures as much as it inscribes the Romantic assertion of transcendence and asserts a political demand. In the following sections, I combine a close textual and multimedia analysis of the key political slogans of the CPSA in the 1930s with an enquiry into the political significance of the particular narrative trajectories along which Communist memory activism has been plotted.

3 The Language of Prophecy: *Mayibuye iAfrika!*

“*Mayibuye!*” is an isiXhosa word which can be translated into English as “May it Return” or “May it be Restored.” “*Mayibuye iAfrika!*”, in turn, is a particularly polysemic and multi-layered term that lends itself to different forms of appropriation: “*May Afrika Return!*” “*Come Back Africa!*” “*Give us Back our Country!*” “*Give us Back our Land*” and “*Africa must be Returned to Us!*” As Sidney Tarrow has suggested, the qualities of ambiguity and indeterminacy allow for resonant phrases such as these to be transferred and repeated across a range of contexts, both spatial and temporal. Echoing the process of Freudian condensation, such terms converge and coalesce a multiplicity of competing ideas (2013, 15). In the context of early twentieth-century anti-colonial discourse, “*Mayibuye iAfrika!*” evokes the memory of, and is therefore a shorthand for, the history of violent colonial conquest and plunder while also encompassing an assertive claim to both stolen territory and human dignity. As is suggested, intergenerational memories of pre-conquest Africa provide a crucial resource for the formulation of an anti-colonial politics. The prophetic voice, with its suggestions of gravitas and solemnity, is closely aligned with the dream of Black vindication, redemption and emancipation implied in Psalm 68: 31 (“Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God”), a phrase which has been important for dissenting Black political traditions of various kinds. As with the Biblical verse,

“Mayibuye!” offers a paradoxical reading of the unfolding of the future through the optics of restoration, return and renewal.⁹ This emphasis constitutes the utopian drive of anti-colonial politics and the work it does in imagining new forms of radical community. The slogan addresses, calls upon, and importunes the absent figure of Africa which is imagined as banished, cut adrift or compromised. Africa, addressed as cherished lost object, becomes an occasion for both melancholy contemplation and revolutionary imagining. In addition, the dialogic device of the address to Africa invokes both a shared continental predicament and the history of pan-Africanist and Black internationalist solidarity and organisation.

The phrase was first popularised in the African National Congress (ANC)-aligned newspaper *Abantu-Batho* (1912–1931) (along with “Wake up Africa!”/“Vuk’Afrika!”). According to Roux, “Mayibuye iAfrika” was not a call to return to an idyllic precolonial past. Rather, it was a demand for “the return of Africa to the Africans in the literal sense” or, at the very least, that Africans as “the overwhelming majority, shall have the right to say how they shall be governed” (1966, 112). The very few copies of *Abantu-Batho* that remain provide evidence of the slogan’s use in advertisements for the newspaper itself, thus suggesting that the slogan and the paper were closely aligned (*Abantu-Batho* 21 April 1930, 8).¹⁰ After *Abantu-Batho*, the term makes a striking re-appearance in several poems by the formidable isiXhosa woman poet Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, published in the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* in the mid-1920s.¹¹ By the 1930s, while continuing in importance for the ANC, the phrase had also become a commonplace slogan in the CPSA’s *Umsebenzi*: it formed part of the newspaper’s masthead between January 1930 and March 1932 (Figure 1) – where the slogan is spliced with the Communist Party hammer and sickle – and it inspired the writing of a popular song (in isiXhosa and Sesotho) that was frequently printed in the newspaper.

9 On the multiple meanings and appropriations of the biblical verse in the South African context, see Sandwith (2022).

10 Its popular currency and multi-faceted deployment are also confirmed by its adoption as the slogan of the League of African Rights, an organisation established by the CPSA in 1929 as part of its efforts to widen its support base through popular mobilisation (Lodge 2022, 140, 148, 242).

11 Thank you to Athambile Masola for pointing me in this direction. Mqgqwetho also published her poetry in *Abantu-Batho* (Limb 2012, 410–417), but only two of these poems survive, neither of which refer to the phrase. In the poems published in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, Mqgqwetho draws on the conventional meaning of the phrase as the transcendence of suffering but also frames an alternative, suggesting that it is not Africa that is absent but her leaders (Opland 2007, 58–61). For more details on Mqgqwetho, See Opland (2007) and Nxasana (2016).

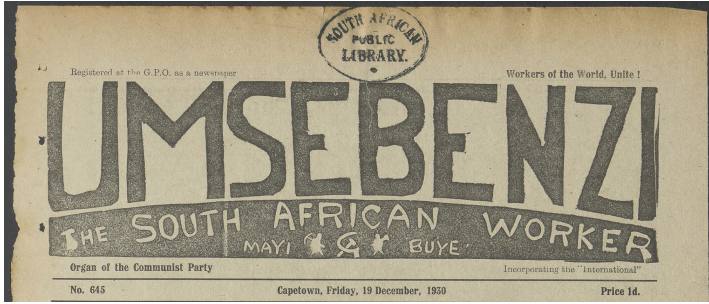


FIGURE 9.1 *Umsebenzi* 19 December 1930, 1 (National Library of South Africa)

Tina sizwe
 Tina sizwe esi ntsundu
 sikalel' i Afrika,
 eyahlutw' obawo betu,
 besese bu' mnyameni.
 Mayibuye, mayibuye,
 mayibuy' iAfrika!
 Makapele namapasi.
 Sitoli nkululeko. (1 August 1930, 4)¹²

[We the nation
 We the nation of black people
 We are weeping for Africa
 Which was stolen from our fathers
 While they were in darkness
 Let Africa Return!
 Let the passes end
 We seize our freedom.]¹³

According to Roux, the song was sung at political meetings and was a popular anthem amongst workers in the Western Cape, where it was also translated into Afrikaans (1966, 232).¹⁴ As indicated in the final three lines of the isiXhosa version,

12 For this and all other translations of isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sesotho, I extend my grateful thanks to Thobile Ndimande. The phrase also appeared in a popular *Umsebenzi* pledge or 'Isifungo' to stand up and fight. It ends with the invocation that peace return to Afrika. "De sibe ngaba kululekileyo e Afrika/Mayibuye" (30 May 1930, 4). A version of the song "Tina Sizwe" is still sung in the present. See: <https://www.702.co.za/articles/312297/listen-thina-sizwe-the-song-the-freedom-front-plus-want-censored>.

13 For the Sesotho version, see 1 August 1930, 4.

14 Roux suggests that the song was sung to the tune of "Oh My Darling Clementine" (1966, 227).

Africa's return was frequently invoked in the context of defiance and the seizing of freedom: "Mayibuye iAfrika!/Makapele namapasi/Sitoli nkululeko." The Mayibuye slogan was also closely aligned with the Comintern-endorsed "Independent Black Republic" slogan and often used interchangeably. As one *Umsebenzi* editorial concludes, "Our reply to 'segregation' and 'white South Africa' must be 'Mayibuye' and 'A Black Republic' [meaning that] the black majority must rule and the whites must accept the position of a racial minority in a democratic country" (7 November 1930, 2). In subsequent years, "Mayibuye" became entrenched as a popular rallying cry of the ANC, accompanied as it was, from the 1940s onwards, with the ANC salute (raised right fist with thumb pointing to the right shoulder). As in earlier uses, "Mayibuye" combined an unambiguous statement of militancy and defiance with the search for self-determination (Walshe 1970, 291).

Aside from songs and headlines in *Umsebenzi*, the slogan appears frequently as one of the textual anchors of the newspaper's many political-pedagogic cartoons. The visual-verbal nexus evident in Figure 9.2 orients the meaning of the term towards the history of colonial plunder and the restoration of land (invoking, in particular, the 1913 Land Act), an emphasis which is underscored



FIGURE 9.2 *Umsebenzi* 8 August 1930, 1 (National Library of South Africa)

by the Afrikaans rendition of the slogan: “Give us Back our Land”/“Gee ons Land Terug.” Further amplifying the political-emotive resonance of the cartoon, the linocut print depiction of an African man pressing his boot onto the chest of the oppressor (iBulu/Boer) enacts a future scenario of violent retribution and the anticipated abolition of segregationist decree.

Figure 9.3 opens up additional dimensions of the workings of this multi-valent slogan. In this case, it both invokes the contemporary reality of suffering through the enlarged figure in the foreground (whose orientation is at odds with those of his peers) and reinforces the anti-colonial narrative of heroic overcoming through the telescoped teleology of a band of workers marching into a glorious future. The tragic dimensions of this rendition are further amplified in the isiZulu caption atop the image – “Avenge Durban Dead by Burning all Passes”/“Pindezelani Abafileyo base Tekwini Ngokutshisa Amapasi” – which references the Dingaans’ Day anti-pass protest in Durban, held on the 16th December 1930, in which several protestors, including prominent CPSA organiser, Johannes Nkosi, lost their lives.

Umsebenzi readers were quick to seize the phrase as a means to augment their resistance to various forms of racial injustice during this period, while also tapping into its melancholy resonance. Solomon Xaba, in his community dispatch from a remote farming town, ends his lament about Black land



FIGURE 9.3 *Umsebenzi* 19 December 1930, 1 (National Library of South Africa)

dispossession with a combination of curse and prophecy: “Akapele amapasi, ayi pela kala bha – eyenzelu muntu ontsundu – akaye kwa Satane lo Hulumeni womcaso. Kuvame ubudhlelwane kuleli le Afrika siti ayibuye iAfrika. Akamenjalo ‘Umsebenzi’ – ipepe angime” (“Let the passes come to an end. Let this government go to Satan, together with their oppression. Let there be unity in this land. Let Africa return. Let ‘Umsebenzi’ reign and stand always”) (5 December 1930, 4). In a letter entitled “Usizi Lwetu Ma-Afrika” (“Our Sorrow, Africans”), M. Ngcobo invokes the slogan as part of her resistance to the imposition of passes for women: “Tina ntombi zase Afrika ngeke siwa pate futi ase tembisi singa pupi naku pupa gawo au sahlupeka iziqili ezweni letu zilungiseleni kuba nesibindi tina sifuna iAfrika ubuye ngokutala kwetu xola mhleli” (“Us young women of Africa, we will not carry them. We are struggling as slaves in our country. Ready yourselves and have courage. We want Africa to come back as it was taken. Peace to you, editor”) (10 July 1931, 1). Another unnamed woman reader, also responding to the pass laws and police harassment, addresses her audience as “Bahlobo bam, bezihlupeki” (“My fellow sufferers”). Like Ngcobo, this reader draws the slogan into dialogue with the traumatic history of slavery while also using it as part of a curse: “Mawutunyelwe esi hongweni umteto omubi wokusenda izihlupeki ongumteto la Pirow! Mayibuye iAfrika!” (“Let the ugly laws of Pirow of sending the poor away go to hell. Mayibuye Afrika!”) (27 January 1934, 3).¹⁵

As these examples suggest, implied recollections of colonial plunder and unlawful occupation are central to the slogan’s resonance in anti-colonial struggles during this period and are closely tied to parallel phrases such as “Get out of Africa,” “Africa for the Africans” and “Fight the Government of Exploiters and Land-Robbers!” (13 June 1930, 3). This history of plunder forms the driving momentum or “problem-complex” (Scott 2004, 79) that animates and motivates anti-colonial arguments and the figurative language and forms of emplotment they favour. The implied evocation of an idyllic or uncorrupted past aligns neatly with the melodramatic and affective figure of the “interrupted feast.” In this vein, the slogan also reprises the irresistible romantic narrative plot structure of heroic overcoming and violent retribution, a teleological form which draws on the “discourse of black vindicationism” (Scott 2004, 81), a discourse that has been “central to Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist writing in North America, Africa and the Caribbean since at least the latter half of the nineteenth century” (2004, 79). Despite these features of heroic Romantic emplotment, the “Mayibuye” slogan simultaneously invokes

15 Oswald Pirow was the Minister of Justice at the time.

a temporal complexity and a melancholic texture that are significantly at odds with the expectations of the anti-colonial Romance template. Simplistic assumptions of heroic overcoming are therefore complicated not only by the slogan's insistent intimations of trauma and the continuity of suffering but also by its backward-looking emphasis on restoration and return: in particular, the way in which it forecasts an emancipatory future via a return to the past. "Mayibuye's" melancholic and restorationist impulses curtail the momentum of the Romance teleology by conjuring both the resonance and value of the past. As a form of interrupted Romance, the Mayibuye slogan, and its multiple invocations by ordinary readers, suggests that its activist potential is to be found in the confluence of both its melancholic-tragic and its protest orientations. While it underscores a reading of commemoration as future-oriented and hopeful, it also holds a space for sorrow, trauma, anger and loss.

4 The Language of Denunciation: Down with the Slave Laws!

Slavery has been a significant site of memory not only for the South African Communist Left but for anti-colonial discourse more generally. The slogan "Down with the Slave Laws" (30 May 1930, 4) as well as companion references to "the government of slavery"/"hulemende wezigqili," "the house of slavery" and the "exploited and oppressed slaves of Africa" (18 April 1930, 2) are an everyday feature of *Umsebenzi*. This is suggestive of both the metaphorical and mnemonic potential of the figure of slavery: of slavery as both trope and memory. A reading of slavery as 'memory-trope' directs attention to the reciprocal relationship between its mnemonic and rhetorical dimensions: in particular, that slavery's metaphorical resonance was informed and sustained by inter-generational memories of the historical experience of slavery. The evidence of *Umsebenzi* suggests that both the history of slavery and its metaphoricity could be conjured by single words, including 'slave' (as noun or adjective), 'slavery,' 'chattel,' 'shackles' and 'chains'. The metaphoric potential of the figure of slavery makes it a compelling rhetorical and affective resource for capturing the particular forms of suffering produced by the system of racial capitalism. It is for this reason that the symbolic conflation of slavery, colonialism and apartheid has been such a commonplace gesture in South Africa's anti-colonial and anti-apartheid political traditions.

The tropic resonance of slavery in colonial contexts reinforces an influential body of work on memory as multi-directional (Rothberg 2009, 2014) and transferable (Rigney 2018b, 253). As Tarrow argues, the language

of contention is portable and can easily migrate to other contexts. In addition, symbolic systems are relational and cumulative. They are not “invented on the spot” (2013, 30) but draw on existing materials. It is for this reason that events in “different locations can become connected as part of a larger transnational dynamics of remembrance” (Rigney 2016, 78). In the South African context, the memory-trope of slavery invokes the world-historical trauma of the African slave trade in a general sense but also refers implicitly to the history of slavery in the Western Cape in South Africa (Dooling 2007) and the slaving practices and ‘inboekstelse’ traditions that characterised the colonial interior (Eldridge and Morton 2019). The temporal proximity of slavery in the early twentieth-century period is also a factor in the potential for slavery’s resignification. This is confirmed in contemporary newspaper reports and obituaries recording the passing of very elderly former slaves¹⁶ as well as in local celebrations of the anniversary of slave emancipation (*Bantu World* 19 May 1934, 1). Pumla Dineo Gqola highlights the unpredictable, often contradictory, workings of the memory of slavery in the South African context, its “multiplicity and conceptual untidiness” and its “refusal (or failure) to be flattened or made linear/truth” (2010, 162). The spectral, recursive workings of the memory of slavery, its refusal to stay in the past, is one way to understand the specificities of slave memory in South African anti-colonial discourse. Slavery becomes an especially productive focus of activist memory because of the formal abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1834. Despite ongoing slaving practices in the South African interior (Eldridge and Morton 2019), the manumission and emancipation of slaves in the Cape Colony (from as early as 1826) represented the triumph of right – in typical heroic-romance parlance – over a terrible historical injustice.¹⁷

In the pages of *Umsebenzi*, the memory-trope of slavery is repeatedly invoked in the language of protest, mobilisation and moral indictment, rather than through the classical eighteenth-century optic of slavery as shame. This is underscored in the accompanying phrase “Down with!” (or, in the isiZulu version, “Pansi!”), a ubiquitous rhetorical (and physical) gesture which registers defiance and outrage. An economical form of political critique-cum-action in relation to a host of villains and practices (including political parties, individuals and phenomena), the “Down with”/“Pansi!” phrase ties a community together as both witnesses to, and agents of, the imminent downfall or ‘falling

16 See for example *Bantu World* 11 February 1933, 2.

17 For an overview of the history of slave emancipation in Cape Town, see Worden, van Heyningen and Bickford-Smith (1998).

down' of injustice in all its forms while also invoking memories of former resistance.

An extract from a letter written by slain Communist Party member, Johannes Nkosi, which appeared in the newspaper as part of a memorial tribute by Albert Nzula, reads as follows: "Never under the sun has a nation been so shackled with the chains of slavery [...] Why not awaken and stand on your feet, Africans?" (9 January 1931, 2). Nkosi's martyrdom inspired a host of references to slavery including an editorial comment on "the black wage slaves of Africa" (20 February 1931, 1) and the headline, "Away with Slave Laws" (24 July 1931, 1). As in other examples, the memory work that these slogans initiate are amplified by visual dramatisations. The frontpage headline, "Fair treatment impossible under Slave Laws" (18 April 1930, 1), for example, is accompanied by an image of a monumental figure breaking the chains that bind him (Figure. 9.4).

For many *Umsebenzi* readers the associations of heroic militancy are also tempered with ideas of suffering and sorrow. For R. Ndimande, for example, "We are slaves in our own land"/"Siyizigqila ezweni letu" (June 1930, 4) while a letter from Tefo Motale uses the memory-trope of slavery to highlight the exploitation of African railway workers in Durban:

Sisebenza kanzima njengezigqila, abanye betu batswalisa amasaka ngekanda, amasaka ombhila, ubhontyisa, amabele nezinye izinto bahambe ibanga lide beyo watula ezinqoleni [...] Impato yase Tekwini iyadabukisa impela asazi ukuti koze kubenini sihlezi ebugqilini!!!

We work very hard like slaves. Some of us are made to carry sacks on our heads, sacks of corn, of beans, wheat and other things and we walk a long distance to offload them from trolleys [...] The conditions in Durban make the heart sore and we don't know when this slavery will end!!! (21 August 1931, 4).

Slavery-based slogans in Communist Party discourse are very clearly deployed as a version of the heroic Romance. As in the "Mayibuye" slogan, the memory-trope of slavery sets up the aggressor and the violent conditions against which the narrative of revolutionary overcoming can unfold with all the necessary emotive and vindicatory force. The invocation of slavery reinforces what Scott calls the "state of injury" that anti-colonial (and, by extension, anti-capitalist revolution) "will heal in a redemptive act of salvation, moral-political vindication, and therapeutic regeneration" (2004, 166). These slogans evoke the horrors of the violent past as a means to think the future of overcoming while the history of emancipation provides the weighty moral vindication upon



FIGURE 9.4 *Umsebenzi* 18 April 1930, 1 (National Library of South Africa)

which this construction depends. As is the case with the “Mayibuye” slogan, the resignification of slavery as a framework for understanding colonialism encompasses the dimensions of both critique and utopia. In *Umsebenzi*, the memory-trope of slavery is conspicuously aligned with the ongoing political protests against the Poll Tax in the 1930s. It also coincides with a three-part

re-publication of “The Revolt in Haiti” by George Padmore (originally published in *Labour Monthly*, June 1930).¹⁸ Emancipation from slavery is imagined and confirmed in the slave revolt. A quote from Wendell Phillips, cited in Padmore’s article, provides a further sense of the emancipatory potential of recalling this history: “There never was a race that, weakened and degraded by such chattel slavery, tore its own fetters, forged them into swords, and won its liberty on the battlefield but one, and that was the black race of San Domingo” (25 July 1930, 2). As indicated, communist protest slogans which invoked the memory-trope of slavery were elaborated in the mode of vindicatory defiance and through the heroic anti-colonial plot structure of righteous overcoming.

At the same time, the fact that the idea of slavery still resonates in the colonial, and later also in the apartheid period, suggests that these conditions are not so readily overcome; that there are continuities and recurrences even into the postcolonial and post-apartheid present. That slavery continued to be such a viable term for understanding the contemporary South African landscape in the 1930s suggests a continuum of experience and a historical sameness that sits uneasily with the progressive, irresistible momentum of anti-colonial Romance emplotments. Slavery understood in terms of spectrality and recurrence leads to a reading not of seamless teleological progress but of the complex interplay and entanglements of the past and the present. As in the case of the “Mayibuye” slogan, the recollection of slavery in the pages of *Umsebenzi* also invokes the plot elements of tragedy – in this case, failure, calamity and contradiction – thus confirming the impossibility of transcendence.

5 The Language of Command: Hands off Abyssinia!

The Italian invasion of Abyssinia/Ethiopia in October 1935 stimulated intense newspaper coverage in South Africa, a vigorous public debate and various forms of protest action in which the CPSA played a prominent role.¹⁹ Popular slogans used in *Umsebenzi* reportage and anti-war rallies included “Hands off Abyssinia” (23 February 1935, 1), “Defend the Last Independent Native State in Africa from the Attacks of Italian Imperialism” (21 June 1935, 1) and “Protect! Abyssinia!”/“Kuselani! Abyssinia!” (21 September 1935, 2). Like the Mayibuye slogan, “Hands off Abyssinia!” invokes an ideal of pre-conquest plenitude

18 The various instalments appeared on 25 July 1930, 1 August 1930, 5 September 1930 and 12 September 1930.

19 For details on South African responses to the Ethiopian conflict, see Johnson (2022) and Sandwith (2022).

while also recalling the long history of Ethiopian territorial autonomy and successful anti-colonial resistance. In this history, the heroic defence of Abyssinia against the Italian invasion at the Battle of Adowa in 1896 looms very large. This spectacular memory of triumphant overcoming accords closely with the hope of the anti-colonial romance genre. In this 1930s moment of recollection, it added a further dimension to Ethiopia's long-standing symbolic and political resonance across a wide range of pan-Africanist and Black diasporic groupings as a figure of Africa's redemption and territorial integrity. The "Hands off Abyssinia" slogan reprises this Romance memory in order to fuel further resistance to the latest colonial outrage, which, in turn, is also narrated and visualised in the newspaper in heightened melodramatic terms.²⁰ In the political slogan, the metonymic image of the greedy, grasping hands of belligerent Italy replays the duality of victim and perpetrator and innocence and threat, each party confronting the other in dogged mortal combat in a "cataclysmic clashing of counterposed forces" (Scott 2004, 68). The impression of stealth and surprise, along with the suggestion of vulnerability, recalls the melodramatic plotting of the interrupted feast, while the assertive posture and moral authority inscribed in the injunctive mode installs African agency and hints at the possibility of retributory violence. In its implicit associations with the psalmist prophecy, "Hands off Abyssinia!" also coalesces ideas of reclamation, restoration and return. The implied teleology of temporal return – to the past-future of vindication and freedom – registers the same complex, overlapping temporality that underpins the "Mayibuye" slogan.

That the cause of Ethiopia would so readily be claimed by Black South Africans speaks to its transnational symbolic resonance across Africa and the Black diaspora, and the ways in which the "sharing and articulation of memory [...] also occurs along lines that transcend and sometimes challenge national borders" (Rigney 2016, 79). With the 1935 Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the recollection of Italy's former defeat at the Battle of Adowa – and by implication, other comparable sites of heroic overcoming such as Haiti and Libya – served to re-activate a transnational history of Ethiopianist thinking which was based on a dissident exegesis of canonical Western texts (including the Bible) and the formulation of a breakaway Black Christianity. The three-fold activist memory work performed by this slogan therefore includes the history of radical Ethiopianist thought-styles, the memory of Italian defeat, and the recollection of pre-conquest Africa and the dream of once-held territorial integrity.

20 See Sandwith (2022).

As Glick argues in relation to the heroic dimensions of C.L.R. James' reading of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* (1936), it "would be a tough sell to completely dismiss the need still for this critical spirit" (2016, 146). In a similar vein, in looking back at *Umsebenzi's* response to the crisis of the Italian invasion, it is hard to imagine a more arresting alternative or a more fitting vehicle than the template of heroic overcoming that the slogan inferred. This, despite what could be read as a simplistic moral opposition between good and evil which required the suppression of the uncomfortable paradox of an imperial nation fighting against imperialist conquest.²¹

6 Concluding Comments

The popular slogans of the Communist Left in South Africa in the 1930s – "Mayibuye iAfrika!", "Down with the Slave Laws!" and "Hands off Abyssinia!" – provide striking examples of the way in which memory inflects the language of protest, invoking a multitude of associations, including the memory of slavery, colonial violence, pre-colonial autonomy, internationalist anti-colonial solidarities and histories of resistance – all in a single word or phrase. This chapter extends the literature on the memory-activism nexus by reading the mnemonic potential of political slogans in both literary-linguistic and narratological terms. It foregrounds an interpretation of political slogans as hyper-compressed narrative emplotments – based on the inherited templates of romance, tragedy, and melodrama – in order to highlight the importance of the shaping function of both language and narrative in the configuration of anti-colonial memory.

The political slogans which circulated in the context of the Communist Party confirm the utility of the hyperbolic anti-colonial romance template for the dreaming of freedom in Africa. In holding fast to the idea of a former condition of security and plenitude, in their implied recollection of both violence and abjection (slavery and Empire in particular), and in their rousing recall of successful Black resistance, these slogans map out the utopian possibility of altered futures in heroic-Romantic terms while also engaging a powerful critique and de-legitimation of contemporary colonial/imperialist regimes. What is clear, however, is that the conventional emplotments of the anti-colonial Romance genre are also interrupted or complicated in several ways. This, not only in the Party-led rhetoric of *Umsebenzi* newspaper but also in

21 See Nurhusein for further details on the "paradox of imperial Ethiopianism" and the articulation of diaspora through the "glorification of royalty" (2015, 425).

readerly appropriations. One sign of plot strain is to be found in the slogans' pronounced melancholic texture and the ways in which the heroic teleologies they inscribe are frequently intertwined with subjective states of trauma, longing, hopelessness and loss. Also pulling the Romance template in unexpected directions are the slogans' temporal complexity and ambivalences. Both "Mayibuye iAfrika" and "Hands off Abyssinia" hold a powerful restorationist and recursive impetus which is at odds with the narrative of revolutionary futurity. In similar fashion, the anti-slavery rhetoric disrupts or complicates progressive temporalities and "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin 2007, 261) through intimations of slavery's persistence. In the pages of *Umsebenzi*, the inherited categories of the Romance template are both installed and reshaped, thus reiterating the need to pay close attention to the specific linguistic textures and narratological dimensions of activist memory work as it plays out in particular historical contexts.

The political slogans of the CPSA carried on a lively existence in the early twentieth-century colonial public sphere, crossing from the multi-media domain of street protest (speeches, banners, rallying cries, posters, pamphlets, songs and chants) to the textual-visual modes of the newspaper medium in a reciprocal, ongoing exchange. While the memory-trope of slavery continued to provide a productive frame for reading in the apartheid period, the utility of the memory of the "last independent Black nation" was dramatically curtailed by the defeat of Abyssinia at the hands of the Italian forces in 1936 and its subsequent occupation. The memory of Africa's return, by contrast, has had a long and varied legacy, serving as a potent rallying point for protest action in the high apartheid period and continuing in post-apartheid South Africa as a reminder of colonial conquest and stolen land,²² while also providing an increasingly compelling resource for decolonial scholarship (Madlingozi 2018).²³

This chapter argues further for new readings of Communist memory culture against its conventional characterisations as state-driven, ossified or atrophied, pointing instead to lively, on-the-ground traditions of animated, active and everyday responsiveness. The intricate cluster of affect, activism and aspiration that characterise the memory cultures of the Communist Left brings

22 See, for example, <https://azapo.org.za/2022/02/12/we-sing-what-we-like/> on the website of the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) (Accessed 3 January 2024).

23 In an interesting turn of events, "Mayibuye" now appears as the slogan of the newly-formed "Umkonkotho we Sizwe" (MK) Party which broke away from the ANC in December 2023 and which is associated with former South African President Jacob Zuma. See Sandwith (2024).

an additional dimension to Rigney's arguments about the overdetermination of the "traumatic paradigm" in cultural memory studies and its habitual focus on violence and victimhood (2018a, 369; see also Reading and Katriel 2015). *Umsebenzi's* activist memory culture sheds light on the particular efficacy of traumatic memory for the mobilisation of resistance and political critique. It affirms the possibility that memorialisation and mobilisation should be read not as competing gestures but as reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. This, in turn, belies the commonly-held idea, as Rigney puts it, that "future-oriented revolutionary movements are by definition amnesic and that memory is always backward looking" (2016, 84). What the colonial context amplifies is not only that remembrance is both "forward-looking and memorialising" (2016, 92) but that trauma and hope are always plotted together. Memory is put to work in attempts to excavate and re-animate the "oppressed past" (Benjamin 2007, 263) in order to contest sanctioned memory and to imagine future alternatives. In their combination of traumatic-melancholic and activist memory, the language and plot structures of the political slogans of the CPSA frame a response to ongoing social injustice which invokes both its acute subjective trauma and its systemic organisation.

Finally, a key rationale for the linking of memory and social movement studies is memory's potential as a political resource for "re-imagining national collectives and transforming cultural norms in society" (Assmann 2023, 1). At the same time, however, one is also mindful of the danger of uncritical reproductions of hyperbolic language and romance-type memory narratives and the kinds of redemptive teleologies they might inscribe. As Scott has argued, this is partly because they sit uncomfortably with the ongoing, even accentuated, patterns of inequality that characterise the postcolonial present. I end with the question of how one narrates this history of memory activism in the postcolonial present when the language of overcoming no longer rings true. To this end, attention to the strategic importance of the anti-colonial romance must be tempered with a sense of its temporal out-of-jointness. A focus on the complexity of the language and narrative emplotments of memory activism makes room for the rearticulation of the resources of anti-colonial activist memory for political critique in the present – in particular, its foregrounding of complex, overlapping temporalities and its insistence on melancholy and suffering. By drawing this 'negative resource' into present-day perspectives on accelerated inequalities, hardening borders and continued injustice, it becomes possible both to affirm the importance of heroic romance-memory and to re-write its political endpoint as an always-unfinished project.

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No Gods No Masters: Anarchist *mots de mémoire* from Titles to T-Shirts

Tashina Blom

1 Introduction

The French slogan ‘Ni Dieu ni maître,’ which is generally translated into English as ‘No Gods No Masters,’ has been used by activists and anarchists since the French socialist revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui launched a newspaper with the title in 1880.¹ It has been translated into English, Spanish and Italian, among other languages, and it has sparked dozens of variations. The slogan’s long trajectory of usage means it has appeared in a wide variety of media-material forms across a changing mediascape and across decades, countries, and contexts. In the nineteenth century, the slogan featured as the title of periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets, and revolutionary almanacs, and even became a popular epitaph on the tombstones of revolutionary figures, allowing these funerary decorations to become sites of commemoration (Lalouette 1991, 138). In the twentieth and twenty-first century the phrase is also increasingly commodified, emblazoned onto everything from T-shirts and tote bags to mugs, key chains, stickers, guitar picks, glow-in-the-dark sow-on patches, baby rompers, embroidered heart-shaped plushies and at least one silver-plated knuckle duster, with most of these objects being offered for sale on the platform Etsy.com, an online marketplace for vintage and home-crafted goods. The slogan has even been printed onto beer and wine bottles, allowing people to consume a political heritage by quite literally imbibing it. The inter-related questions this chapter aims to address are: how and when does this slogan function as a site of anarchist cultural memory? And how can something so closely associated with anarchism also become so commodified,² especially

1 The preparation of this chapter was financially supported by the European Research Council under grant agreement 788572 for the project *Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe*.

2 I do not use the term ‘commodification’ in a Marxist sense but to refer to commodity-production more narrowly. My use of the term ‘commodification’ is analogous with what anthropologist Igor Kopytoff described as ‘commoditisation’. Kopytoff’s anthropological approach to commoditisation focuses on cultural processes that contribute to marking certain goods as

since this political philosophy and movement is seemingly at odds with consumerism (see also Erbil 2024)? Does commodification erode the radical anarchist connotation of the slogan, or does commodity production have its part to play as a mode of dissemination for the cultural memory of activism? While most slogans that have gained currency have been printed onto commodity products, which allows them to be exchanged for actual currency, this specific slogan makes an interesting case study for unpacking the stakes of the printing process involved in reproducing the slogan, which can be either distant or close to the values expressed in it.

Protest slogans shed light on the important role of language and multimodal discursive strategies in the memory-activism nexus, in which “remembering the past, shaping the future remembrance of the present, and struggles for a better future feed into each other” (Rigney 2018, 372). One of the defining features of protest slogans is their memorability, as phrases that are short and often use distinctive rhyme and rhythm. They are designed to ‘catch on’ or ‘stick’ – sometimes quite literally. Yet, there have only been a few studies to date that focus specifically on what it is exactly that ‘catches on.’ What kinds of memories are mobilised or reworked when a protest slogan from the past is used in the present? To answer this question, this chapter focuses on two prominent patterns in the usage of ‘Ni Dieu ni maître.’ The first is its use as a title for historical documentaries, anthologies and books on anarchism, which this chapter will short-hand as *commemoration*; and the second is its *commodification*, referring to the slogan’s appearance on a wide range of commodity objects. The analysis will focus mainly on the latter.

As I will show, linguistic sites differ from other sites of memory. Commemoration through language takes a different form than embodied anniversary commemorations, ceremonies, or the erection, contestation or demolition of monuments. Yet specifically textual and paratextual practices can be equally important to preserving memory, such as naming a public square after a revolutionary figure or naming an anthology after an anarchist slogan. The production of activist commodities and paraphernalia is not traditionally considered a commemorative practice, either. However, this chapter argues that it is an important factor in the dissemination of the memory of activism. Moreover, distinguishing between activist-run and mainstream production of these commodities, this chapter argues that for anarchist movements particularly, the

commodities at specific moments and to specific groups. “[T]he production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing ... the same things may be treated as a commodity at one time and not another” (Kopyoff 1986, 64).

way these commodities are produced is a key part of the repertoire of contention and may continue the movements' legacy. The slogan's use in titles and on T-shirts constitutes a commemorative practice that is specific to linguistic sites of memory, where the way language is produced materially becomes a key factor in how it mobilises memory. My analysis draws on seminal memory scholar Pierre Nora's conceptualisation of the symbolic, functional, and material dimensions of a site of memory (1989), showing how all three work together in making protest slogans places or, rather, phrases "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 1989, 7).

2 Protest Slogans as Sites of Memory

Protest slogans generate memorability through their aesthetic form. As phrases that are easy to remember, they stick around due to their "special sound patterns" which often draw on poetic techniques such as "parallelism, antimetabole, colloquialism, alliteration, assonance and antithesis" (Al-Sowaidi et al. 2017, 629).³ As hybrid visual, textual, tactile, and acoustic signs, they are also multimodal. Moreover, "slogans have histories" (Colla 2013, 38); in composing slogans, activists often draw "on a known corpus of older protest slogans, some going back decades" (Colla 2013, 38). In a similar vein, Zoé Carle has proposed that some slogans acquire their own "cultural biographies" over their long trajectories of use (Carle 2019, 249), borrowing the term from anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1986). As ties to the past, protest slogans can also be used in disseminating, mediating, recontextualising, appropriating, and commodifying cultural memories. Alessandra Miklavcic's study on slogans and post-memory in the Italo-Slovenian borderland, for instance, analyses how the cultural memory of Slovenians entering Trieste in 1945 was mobilised in a 2002 slogan which conveyed a "condensed notion of history" and became a symbolic "weapon" to avenge the past (Miklavcic 2008, 444). Ned Richardson-Little and Samuel Merrill's article on the far-right movement Pegida's appropriation of 'Wir sind das Volk' shows how the slogan's invocation of the 1989 democratic protests functioned as a so-called 'reputational shield' (Ivarsflaten 2006) to deflect attention away from Pegida's extremism (Richardson-Little and Merrill 2020).

I propose that protest slogans with long histories of use are similar to sites of memory in that they pack dense and shifting meanings into a shorthand form.

3 Antimetabole refers to the repetition of words in reversed order, making it a special case of what is also called 'chiasmus'. An example is a 'jet-black black jet' to refer to a black airplane.

Nora's description of sites of memory holds true for these slogans as well: they "capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs" and through adaptation, appropriation, commodification, and recontextualisation they also have the "capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (Nora 1989, 19). In French academic literature, protest slogans are variously described as "mots de la colère" (Van de Velde 2020) or "mots de désordre" (Fraenkel 2006). Punning on Nora's seminal work on 'lieux de mémoire' (1989), this chapter aims to describe how protest slogans can also become "mots de mémoire." Nora's conceptualisation of sites of memory includes intangible practices, symbols, and even words and expressions that draw on a shared past.⁴ It is nevertheless worthwhile to focus on the specific dynamics of linguistic sites of memory. Slogans are more "portable" than most of Nora's examples, since they travel through physical space and historical context as well as across surfaces (Nora 1989, 22). Words of memory can appear on a wide array of surfaces which each have their own aesthetic, affective and reproductive affordances. In contrast to Nora's emphasis on national memory, moreover, words can be used transnationally and even anti-nationally; 'No Gods No Masters,' for instance, conveys anarchist ideals including anti-statism.

Just like sites of memory, words of memory combine the, sometimes forgotten, three-dimensionality Nora originally proposed: "they are *lieux* in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional" (Nora 1989, 18–19). The *materiality* of a slogan reflects how contemporary memory relies on mediation and "the materiality of the trace" (Nora 1989, 13). Slogans are *functional* as a linguistic and semantic utterance with certain rhetorical effects, and they are *symbolic* in terms of the aura bestowed on them by those who use and hence reproduce the slogans by spray-painting them onto walls, using them as a title, or printing them onto a T-shirt. As I will show in this chapter, all three dimensions contribute to making the protest slogan 'No Gods No Masters' a site of memory.

3 Commemoration: 'No Gods No Masters' as Title, Epigraph or Motto

When Louis Auguste Blanqui chose this title for his newspaper, the slogan was directed at an audience of politically affiliated subscribers and geared towards

4 While his work acknowledges that symbols can become a 'lieu de mémoire,' this definitional capaciousness has been the target of criticism by those who have questioned its usefulness with the question "what is not a lieu de mémoire?" (Olick and Robbins 1998, 111).

strengthening revolutionary socialism with a cohesive anti-authoritarian and anti-religious message. Interestingly, in its afterlife, the slogan rarely gets associated with the individual of Blanqui.⁵ Instead, from the late nineteenth century to the present, the slogan has predominantly been used as an anarchist rallying cry. As historian Daniel Guérin observed in his anthology of anarchism (titled 'No Gods No Masters'), although "the motto in question had not originated exclusively with anarchists, with the passage of time it came to be theirs" (Guérin 2005, 2). Guérin claims the slogan for anarchists through metaphors of ownership and belonging, exemplified by his phrasing "it came to be theirs" (Guérin 2005, 2). This corroborates the idea that linguistic sites of memory have something in common with spatial ones as they, too "are the property of particular social groups and they contain some or other values (ideas, norms, behavior patterns) important from the perspective of that group" (Szpociński 2016, 249).

Guérin outlines how the phrase became anarchist through its continued reuse across media materialities as it appeared on buildings and publications alike. After Blanqui died in 1881, "a number of [anarchist] groups and newspapers laid claim to the title," and the slogan was displayed on "the walls of the Maison du Peuple in the Rue Ramey in Paris" (Guérin 2005, 1). Since then, it has not only been entrenched in an anarchist tradition but has become a signifier for that same tradition. The slogan became "the catchphrase of the anarchist movement, even if the latter's inspiration was so very different from – not to say contrary to – Blanquism's" (Guérin 2005, 1). In order for the phrase to become an anarchist signifier, the connection to Blanqui had to be downplayed. This happened through its repeated use in an anarchist context and is further consolidated by the many explicitly commemorative works on anarchism that use the slogan as its title (Craib and Maxwell 2017; Guérin 2005; Ramonet 2017).

Over the last twenty years, there has been an abundance of anthologies, retrospectives and collections that use the slogan as their title. This coincided with something of a renaissance of anarchist ideas. The early 2000s were characterised by "the full-blown revival of anarchism, as a global social movement and coherent set of political discourses, on a scale and to levels of unity and diversity unseen since the 1930s" (Gordon 2007, 29). When the slogan is used as the title of an anthology like Guérin's, which brings together the ideas of various anarchists from Peter Kropotkin to Errico Malatesta with elaborate theoretical primers, the phrase's use has a particular function. The slogan is not

5 An exception is the graphic novel on his life *Ni Dieu ni maître: Auguste Blanqui l'Enfermé* (Kourwinsky and Roy 2014).

only a site of anarchist memory tethered to a historical retrospective, but it also brings the diversity of ideas presented together under the same header. The historical documentary series *Ni Dieu ni maître: Une histoire de l'anarchisme* (2017, dir. Tancrède Ramonet) similarly uses the slogan to bring together a diverse history that spans over a century and combines discussion of events and figures from the Paris Commune to the Mexican Revolution, and from Michael Bakunin to Murray Bookchin. The slogan's remediation as a title not only ensures its longevity but also serves a particular function, similar to one that Foucault has described regarding authors:

An author's name is not simply an element in a discourse [...] it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts." (Foucault 1998, 210)

The use of 'Ni Dieu ni maître' in explicit commemoration of various moments in the history of anarchism functions in a similar way. But the slogan not only establishes a relationship among texts; it also lends coherence to a disparate assortment of ideas, individuals, and events, all of which it classifies as belonging to the anarchist tradition. 'Ni Dieu ni maître' becomes a site of anarchist memory precisely because of this coherence-generating classificatory function, as it comes to serve as "a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction" (Foucault 1998, 215).

As a title, the slogan becomes a shorthand signifier tied to the commemoration of historical events, figures, and developments that have shaped anarchism as a political tradition. As such, it provides an anarchist and hence anti-statist rather than nation-state-inflected testament to the "need to go in search of [one's] own origins and identity" (Nora 1989, 15). The slogan is also used in works and exhibitions that contest, expand or localise what is canonised as anarchist. *No Gods No Masters No Peripheries: Global Anarchisms* aims to challenge and expand the geographic focus of the study of anarchism, which it pluralises (Raymond and Maxwell 2015). It includes texts on anarchist political practices in indigenous and anti-colonial movements outside of Europe, texts on anarchist history in Argentina, Chile and Peru, and contributions on urban and spatial resistance practices during the Arab Spring. By adding the clause 'no peripheries,' the book uses the iconic slogan itself to challenge eurocentrism in the memory of anarchism. The slogan's classificatory function is

at work, substantially broadening what can be classified as belonging to an anarchist tradition. The slogan's continued remediation across periodicals, newspapers and documentaries entrenched its status as a shorthand carrier of a widening range of anarchist ideals and examples, and this consolidation also contributed to the phrase becoming a source of income, as the next section will explore.

4 Commodification of 'No Gods No Masters': from Tombstones to T-Shirts

Contemporary capitalism has given us slogans printed onto every imaginable use object, turning them into a kind of late-stage capitalist stand-in for the relic. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (2008), perhaps these commodity objects constitute relics in an age of mechanical reproduction. Thinking in a similar vein to Benjamin, Pierre Nora wrote that "even an apparently purely material site like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura" (Nora 1989, 19). As I will argue in this section, how objects are produced can become part of that symbolic aura.

Tension exists between anarchist thought and practices on the one hand, where "anti-consumption practices figure largely in the lifestyles of many anarchists" (Portwood-Stacer 2012, 88), and this slogan's wide commodification in disposable and sometimes mass-produced objects on the other. However, the distinction between activist cultures of production (e.g. graffiti or zines) and commodity production (mugs or T-shirts) is not always clear-cut, given that activists themselves – rather than corporate retailers – often produce badges, tote bags, and T-shirts to fund their work.

Suspending a moral or political judgement on commodity production and the commodification of activist heritage opens up a space for unpacking how the cultural memory of activism is disseminated through the mass production of objects and ephemera. Duygu Erbil has argued that the production of protest ephemera is an important part of "the cultures of production and circulation that generate and accommodate cultural remembrance" (Erbil 2023, 90), but points out that commodification often generates unease and anxiety which "emerges from the perception that once memory is brought into the circuit of exchange-value, it risks losing its use-value in activism" (Erbil 2024). Yet while Erbil (2024) argues that this critique of "commodification should pertain to the question of those spheres of social life in which mnemonic practices are carried out by individuals and communities, rather than designating the mere existence of memory objects that are bought and sold within the capitalist market,"

I argue that commodity production can also be considered an intentional cultural remembrance practice. Therefore, I approach the question of the role of commodities in activist remembrance here by distinguishing between commercial and activist-led commodity production. In doing so, I take up her prompt that more research is needed in cultural memory studies “that takes into account property relations ranging from media ownership structures to intellectual property laws legislating copyright, patents and trademarks” by focusing on a form of production that is both activist-led and inspired by copy-left and anarchist values. Previous studies have indicated the importance of the dissemination and recontextualisation of memories through commodities, such as stickers “produced by an activist collective and distributor of anti-fascist merchandise” (Merrill 2020, 127). In a similar vein, Red Chidgey has pointed out that the commodification of the image of Rosie the Riveter was an important factor in fabricating a mythical icon of feminist cultural memory (Chidgey 2018). More recently, she has argued that the collision of consumerism and activism deserves more critical attention given the “emergence of new activist arrangements in this late capitalist moment” (Chidgey 2021, 1055) and has suggested “a way out of the impasse of the celebrity feminism debate (where branding and commerce = bad, grassroots organising= good)” (1058). My analysis navigates a similar binary impasse, which manifests itself in the pejorative views and prejudices towards commodity production among many scholars and activists. Sociologists working on the memory of Che Guevara, for instance, have considered the commodification of his iconic portrait on those “omnipresent T-shirts” as an example of the “trivialization of an initially radical, revolutionary figure,” claiming that the image has “lost most of its power as a political symbol” (Larson and Lizardo 2007, 426). However, “revolutionaries join the merchandising frenzy, too” (Vargas Llosa 2005), and commodity production is a crucial element in enhancing the longevity of a protest slogan and the cultural memories mobilised by linguistic sites of memory (see also Erbil 2023; Vargas Llosa 2005).

A case in point is the range of online shops named after the slogan ‘No Gods No Masters.’ The shop ‘No gods no masters.com’ specialises in “activist and anti-racist T-shirts” and is related to a self-described ‘boutique militante’ of ethical clothing called ‘ni dieu ni maître.org.’ In fact, both shops belong to the same cooperative, which operates in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and German, using translated versions of the slogan as its name and URL. At the metalevel of the website URL, the slogan performs the same classificatory function as a book title, bringing together a disparate range of causes, figures (such as Louise Michel and Peter Kropotkin) and signifiers (such as the colour black and the Anarchist ‘anarchy is order’ symbol).

The website title also tethers other social movements to anarchism, such as environmentalist and anti-racism mobilisations, of which they also sell merchandise. This diversity under an anarchist banner supports Uri Gordon's observation that since the late 1990s anarchism has become "the defining orientation of prominent activist networks" so that "anarchism today is the principal point of reference for radical social change movements in the North" (Gordon 2007, 29). As the slogan is adapted and connected to new clauses, such as peripheries, or bosses, husbands, or borders, its meaning is expanded and the site of memory comes to include, for instance, labour rights movements, the struggle for women's rights, and anti-globalisation protests. Adaptation not only widens the range of political causes at stake but also the geographic circumscription of the relevance of those ideals, as the slogan traverses local, regional, and transnational contexts. Despite this potentially open-ended sprawl of causes, however, the shop's mode of production connects its practice, and its products, firmly to anarchist history, as it perpetuates a longer tradition of anarchist ethical production.

According to the website's Frequently Asked Questions, the items for all the different national shops are made in the United States, with fairtrade organic cotton and organic and vegan non-toxic printing inks, using local sweatshop-free labour that adheres to a specific code of conduct. Entire paragraphs of the FAQ – which often read more like short manifestoes and sometimes link to longer essay-length blog posts – are dedicated to the factory workers' labour standards, with a level of detail that not only gives exact specifics on the hourly, daily and monthly wage but also mentions "benefits such as paid time off, health care, company-subsidized lunches, bus passes, free English as additional language classes, on-site massage therapists, free bicycles and on-site bike mechanics, free parking in addition to the proper lighting and ventilation" (No Gods No Masters, "Information," 2024). Not only are the labour conditions detailed, but also the cooperative's adherence to the principle of printing on-demand, since this eliminates the need to stock inventory that might not get sold, hence creating "less fabric waste than conventional manufacturing [...] zero inventory, zero waste" (No Gods No Masters, "Why do we use print on demand"). The organisation contrasts their method to traditional clothing shops, which often use screen printing techniques which "[require] large investments to print batches of thousands of t-shirts" and force sellers to only focus on the best-selling designs, colours and sizes, stating: "[T]hat's exactly the mainstream capitalist logic that we want to avoid reproducing. We prefer variety and inclusivity rather than following popularity dictated by market trends" (No Gods No Masters, "Why do we use print on demand").

As these detailed statements indicate, the shop adheres to anarchist principles in four different ways. First, it allows people to engage in ethical consumerism by buying ethically made fair trade and sustainable products. Second, it aims to diversify its range of products in order to give visibility to “a larger range of topics that represent all activist struggles and social causes, even the lesser-known ones” (No Gods No Masters, “Why do we use print on demand”). Third, it is cooperatively owned and run by a collective. And fourth, part of the proceeds from the sales are funnelled back into activism, as the coop has raised donations for a variety of radical and community causes, such as the National Network of Abortion funds, Black Lives Matter, Refugee Community Kitchen and an Antifascist Defence Fund (No Gods No Masters, “Donations Announcements”). The cooperative also funds ten web servers that host and service over 30 different anarchist websites cost-free, and celebrates on their website how services that are “normally reserved for professionals are made accessible to the activist community through the sales of t-shirts” (No Gods No Masters “10 servers”).

Although anti-consumerism is often identified as a key characteristic of anarchist movements, “anti-consumption encompasses both abstinence from consumption and forms of consumption that are meant to signify opposition to consumption, even if the objective content of the practice seems to involve consuming something” (Portwood-Stacer 2012, 88). In other words, anti-consumerism can also mean tactical consumerism such as the consumption of goods that are produced ethically. As the case of ‘No Gods No Masters’ shows, this can become a driver for the circulation of linguistic sites of memory as commodities even in movements characterised by anti-consumerism. The English version of this website alone offers no less than 34 different T-shirts that feature the slogan, as well as various adaptations of it. These are sold with a description which contextualises the slogan’s history as “an anarchist and labor slogan” (No Gods No Masters, “No Gods No Masters T-shirts,” 2024).

The shop’s memory work, however, goes beyond simply encouraging anarchist ethical consumption. Since the practice of fair, autonomous, cooperatively-owned and run printing is a key anarchist tradition (Riot 2014), the shop solidifies the symbolic value of the slogans it prints through its mode of production. As a medium, printing is intricately intertwined with the development of anarchism, since anarchist ideals and practices became constitutive in the context of nineteenth-century print culture. Ideas on self-governance, labour organisation, the socialisation of wealth, and the need to take control of the means of production, which anarchists advocated for in their periodicals, were actively put into practice by anarchist printers, who sometimes received a collective wage and split it between them, or “created

production cooperatives, cooperative shops and restaurants, labour exchanges and mutual funds” (Riot 2014, 818). As Kathy Ferguson observes in her story of the politics of anarchist printing, this combination of intellectual and physical work was a crucial defining feature of anarchism:

The printers’ bodies and the printing apparatus were ubiquitous aspects of anarchist organising, their materiality central to the merger of intellectual and physical labor prized by anarchists in their schools and communities[...] While the stock image of the bearded, black-clad, bomb-toting anarchist prevails in the public eye, a more representative figure for the classical anarchist movement would be the printer, composing stick in hand, standing in front of the type case, making and being made by the material process for producing and circulating words. (2014, 392)

Nineteenth-century anarchism emerged through and was shaped by the material realities of print culture, and its words and deeds were entwined. This tradition is continued from Blanqui’s newspaper to the 21st-century activist T-shirt operating under the same slogan. Slogans, and language more generally, do not only mediate and shape cultural memories; the specific mode of cultural production at stake and the organisation of labour entailed in the act of (re)producing words on surfaces can also be part of a linguistic site of memory. In the case of the T-shirts sold by the No Gods No Masters cooperative, then, it is not the materials themselves that are “memory-saturated” (Rigney 2015, 21), but the media-materiality of those objects. As the literal and figurative product of an autonomous, horizontally organised and cooperatively owned form of printing, both nineteenth-century publications bearing the title and these T-shirts spread a propagandistic message while simultaneously implementing their ideals in how they produce that message.

How words are reproduced can be mnemonically close or distant to how the aspirational production of words was organised in the past. Activist-run, DIY or lo-fi forms of reproduction, remediation, and dissemination of ‘No Gods No Masters’ function as a linguistic site of memory across all three dimensions identified by Nora; they are functional, material and symbolic. In the case of the T-shirts, they are *functional* in disseminating a mobilising message and anti-authoritarian ideal from the past to the present, signalling that the anarchist political tradition that the phrase has come to stand for is still relevant today. Secondly, the slogan’s *materiality* as a T-shirt has its own affective, aesthetic and reproductive affordances that contribute to the slogan’s longevity and its capacity to function as a site of memory. Thirdly, the labour and resources involved in the printing of a T-shirt stay close to the practices and principles of

nineteenth-century anarchist print culture, which is invested with a *symbolic value* as the practice of printing is politicised in the longer history of anarchism from which the slogan stems.

These T-shirts, then, do not mobilise memories of specific events but invoke longer histories of production. The material production of the slogan and its proximity to practices that stem from the past is part of what makes it a site of memory. This also applies, for instance, to feminist slogans which, when written on the body, “continue the feminist project of taking bodies seriously as both the subject and object of thinking” (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 3). In other words, the way slogans are produced is part of the activist repertoire, in which different movements emphasise different modes of production. While feminist activists print slogans onto T-shirts as well, for these movements the mnemonic link to the printed word as an opportunity for both practising and preaching ideals of horizontality is not as much part of the repertoire as it is for anarchists. Conversely, the practice of writing slogans on the body is different for feminists and anarchists, since for the latter, this repertoire is less intricately wound up with the claims and ideals at stake in the movement.

The materiality that determines how the slogan circulates, then, constitutes a form of activism itself. T-shirts emblazoned with political slogans have been a cultural staple since their arrival in the 1960s when “Plastisol ink was invented which changed the speed and cost of printing garments” (Fabrics Galore 2022). The inks used in conventional screen-printing techniques, however, use up a lot of the world’s water resources; an estimated “200 tons of fresh water per ton of dyed fabric” (Conscious Challenge 2019). The traditional dyes to produce slogans on T-shirts do not only consume water, they are also a major source of water pollution as “textile production is estimated to be responsible for about 20% of global clean water pollution from dyeing and finishing products” (European Parliament 2020). Given this context, wearing a T-shirt featuring the slogan ‘No Gods No Masters’ bought from the eponymous online shop which uses on-demand printing and organic vegetable inks constitutes a political act that combines anarchist thought and practice in a way that does not hold true if the T-shirt had been mass-produced using traditional printing processes. The former not only carries an anarchist slogan and message from the past into the present at a semiotic level but also honours the implicit legacy of nineteenth-century anarchist practices through the ethical organisation of the printing process. Commodity production and activist cultural production, then, are not incommensurable but, instead, regularly go together and their fusion is an important mode of disseminating and shaping the cultural memory of activism.

E-commerce platforms like Amazon, Redbubble, Teepublic and Alibaba also stock mass-produced T-shirts, stickers, and notebooks featuring the original slogan and adaptations and translations of it. Whereas the website No Gods No Masters offers a description which contextualises the historical origins and ideas at stake in the use of the slogans printed onto their T-shirts, this is not the case when commodities featuring the slogan are presented on the website of major retailers. A useful concept for understanding this second kind of mass-produced commodification of the slogan is Samuel Merrill's uptake of the concept of 'context collapse' (Merrill 2020, 115). Applying the concept to memory studies, Merrill explores the ways in which the digital remediation of memory objects "can accelerate and multiply opportunities for the erosion and 'collapse' of their original historical and biographical contexts" (Merrill 2020, 115). That 'context collapse' can also happen at the media-material, rather than at the semantic, level, when mainstream retailers print the slogan. The distinction between commercial cultures of mass-production and activist cultures of production is crucial in determining to what extent the commodity collapses a slogan's original context of production, since a slogan's materiality, functionality and symbolism work in tandem to make it function as words of memory.

To conclude, sites of memory can become sources of income when they are commodified, for instance as storied versions of the past and the "mass cultural representations" produced in the culture industry (Landsberg 2018, 149). The same holds true for words of memory, even though these are more shorthand references to the past than storied versions of it. Through its historical trajectory during which it was often used as a title, the slogan 'No Gods No Masters' mobilises a memory not of discrete singular events but of a diffuse and longer history of anarchist struggle and anarchist practices. Nonetheless, these linguistic sites of memory, whether they are literally worn on the body as a T-shirt or whether they become an attention-grabbing book title, can generate income due to their recognisability. At the same time, the recognisability of these linguistic sites of memory is in turn amplified by their appearance on commodity objects. In other words, what could be called the commodification-commemoration nexus is an important part of the memory-activism nexus.

5 Conclusion: from *lieux de mémoire* to *mots de mémoire*

In analysing how slogans with long histories of use become sites of memory, I have identified two patterns: their use in explicit contexts of commemoration and their commodification. They are commemorative when they become

titles of books, documentaries, and anthologies that offer a retrospective of anarchism as a political movement. Here, the use of these words fulfils Foucault's 'classificatory function' since they bridge the differences between seemingly incoherent ideas and events by bringing them together under a single signifier and phrase. The reuse of 'No Gods No Masters' as a title is a testament to a "will to remember" not so much the slogan's literal origins but the historical and political trajectories of use it has come to stand for, meaning that its use as a title in cultural production about anarchism can be mobilised for "the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer" (Nora 1989, 17–18).

The commodification of the slogan, meanwhile, sheds light on the three-dimensionality of linguistic sites of memory as material, symbolic, and functional signifiers as well as on the dynamics that underly how these sites of memory can become sources of income. As words are shapeshifting signifiers that can be adapted, translated, and transported across languages, contexts and countries, a focus on linguistic sites of memory can be especially useful for studying the memory of transnational, and even anti-national, political movements such as anarchism. It also sheds a light on how and where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" in language, which never exists in a vacuum but occurs on specific surfaces and is produced by acts which also constitute social rituals imbued with their own symbolic meaning (Nora 1989, 7).

This chapter has aimed to address the importance of commodity production in the dissemination of protest slogans and the cultural memories they mobilise. It distinguished between activist cultures of production and commercial cultures of mass production and argued that the former's proximity to ideals and practices of production carries on an anarchist tradition that stems from the nineteenth century, just like the slogan itself. While the memory of activism is often understood to be about the remembrance of spectacular moments in history such as revolutionary upheavals, the bloody defeat of protesters, or the mass mobilisation of people taking to the streets, this analysis shows that the memory of activism can also be located in the perpetuation of traditions of activist cultural production and the sustained efforts at stake at spreading a revolutionary message. As Nora famously argued, memory attaches itself to sites whereas history is about events. The slogan 'Ni Dieu ni maître' and its adaptations, translations, and remediations do not refer to or evoke the memory of moments in history that are usually considered heroic. Instead, under the right circumstances, the slogan's reproduction continues a tradition of labour organisation at stake in disseminating the ideas that mobilise and inspire people. This analysis of 'Ni Dieu ni maître' shows that seemingly mundane deeds behind the production of words, like disseminating a newspaper

or producing printed words ethically, can be part of sites of memory and considered no less heroic than the spectacular moments and memories of protest that are usually recalled in the cultural memory of activism.

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Grammar and its Political Affordances: The Resonance of the Middle Voice from the Greek Crisis Decade to ‘Post-Crisis’ Imaginaries

Maria Boletsi

1 Introduction

Crisis is a polysemic and multivalent concept. Harking back to its first meanings from the Greek *κρίσις* (*krisis*), which resonate in its later uses, we find choice, decision, separation, judgment, critique or diagnosis among them (Koselleck 2006, 358). Crisis can signal a historical turning point or paradigm shift but also—especially today—a chronic state, decoupled from the prospect of resolution (Agamben 2013; Boletsi, Houwen, and Minnaard 2020, 2–3). According to Giorgio Agamben, today “crisis,” instead of fostering critique or real change, “has become an instrument of rule” that “legitimise[s] political and economic decisions that in fact dispossess citizens and deprive them of any possibility of decision” (2013). This governmentality of crisis serves “a *politics without an alternative*” or the so-called TINA doctrine (“There Is No Alternative”) (Badiou 2007, 4). When crisis becomes a generalised framework or condition, contesting this framework through forms of protest and resistance becomes increasingly challenging.

Disrupting crisis rhetoric, I argue, requires more than a shift in vocabularies: we need to talk about *grammars* of crisis and resistance. Previously, I put forward the notion of “grammars of crisis” as a conceptual tool for exploring larger patterns that undergird discourses of crisis but also for tracing the transformative or emancipatory potentialities that grammatical categories open up (Boletsi in Boletsi et al. 2021, 25–26). Drawing on this notion of grammars of crisis, in this chapter I treat grammatical categories not only as linguistic constructs, but as dynamic conceptual and interpretive lenses that can modulate specific understandings of subjectivity, agency, temporality, memory, responsibility, and relationality. These categories, I argue, carry certain political and ethical affordances and modes of relating to the world. Disentangling these affordances can offer novel insights into the workings both of crisis rhetoric and of alternative languages of resistance that have emerged through recent crisis-scapes. As conceptual lenses, grammatical categories can also prompt

new understandings of how past languages of protest resonate in contemporary ones; that is, how the cultural memory of protest is inflected through grammar.

My focus lies mainly on the category of *voice* in grammars of crisis and protest. In times of declared crisis, binary modes of framing subjects and situations become more pronounced. In this context, the subject positions favoured by crisis rhetoric follow the binary of the active and the passive (Boletsi 2016; 2021): perpetrators versus victims, guilty versus innocent, powerful versus powerless. On the one hand, the *active* voice can present precarious, crisis-stricken people as autonomous and willing subjects responsible for their own predicament, and thus as either (1) guilty and deserving of the crisis (e.g., in the case of the recent Greek financial crisis of 2009–2018), or (2) threats to the security and lifestyle of ‘autochthonous’ citizens (e.g., in the declared migration crisis since 2015), or (3) resilient bodies expected to endure or overcome the crisis through individual merit, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness, and perseverance, and without the imperative of systemic change (Boletsi 2016; Bracke 2016). In other words, the active voice can cast unemployed, disenfranchised people or indebted nations as “spoiled children” who ought to be disciplined, e.g., through austerity measures (Graeber 2011, 229; Boletsi 2016, 8) or violently displaced people as dangerous hordes ‘invading’ fortress Europe. The passive voice, on the other hand, feeds the reverse side of the same coin: the popular trope of *victimhood*, which often figures in humanitarian discourses, presents crisis-stricken people as passive victims in need of saving or patronage. While the latter framing can serve noble humanitarian objectives, it can also deprive victimised subjects of their individuality, agency, and autonomous subjectivity or impede them from pursuing their own dreams, projects, and desires as intersectional subjects with multiple affiliations (Celik 2015, 127–34; New Keywords Collective 2016, 26–27).

The binary choice between active and passive might seem inescapable, yet it is not. In my previous work, I delineated alternative conceptions of subjectivity and agency facilitated by the grammar of *the middle voice*. The middle voice used to be a morphologically distinct grammatical category in ancient Greek and other ancient Indo-European languages, where it functioned alongside the passive and the active voice. As a category with *exclusive* morphological markers, however, it vanished from modern languages, eclipsed by the active/passive binary. While most modern Indo-European languages today have a binary morphological distinction between the active and passive voice, these “morphological categories (*voice*) do not always coincide with the semantic categories (*diathesis*)” (Mackridge in Manney 2000, 3). In other words, the *semantics* of the middle voice, or, more accurately, the middle *diathesis*, still

survives in many modern languages, finding expression through active or passive verbs or other grammatical constructions.¹

What marks middle voice constructions, then? Whereas in the active voice the process or action is accomplished outside the subject, in the middle voice the subject of the verb remains inside the designated action and is affected by it. Thus, in middle voice constructions in modern English, such as “John sacrificed (himself) for his family” or “the boat sunk,” John and the boat are the action’s subjects but also undergo something. Discussing an example by Meillet and Benveniste, Barthes notes that “the verb *to sacrifice* (ritually) is active if the priest sacrifices the victim in my place for me, and it is middle voice if, taking the knife from the priest’s hands, I make the sacrifice for myself” (1972, 142). Thus, the middle voice does not exclusively concern intransitive verbs: “even if an object is involved,” and thus the verb is transitive (142), the subject is internal to the action and, Benveniste writes, it “effects while being affected,” occupying a space of both agency and patency (Benveniste 1971, 148, 150; Pecora 1991, 210).

This positionality of the subject has epistemological and ethico-political implications, which is what interests me here. To tease out these implications, I also use the middle voice in a broader sense: as an expressive mode that yields an alternative conceptual framework for understanding agency, subjectivity, and relationality. To flesh out this understanding of the middle voice, I take my cue from poststructuralist theorisations of this category, bringing them in conversation with Hartmut Rosa’s theory of *resonance* (2019), in which the middle voice becomes a mode of relating to the world. Rosa’s take on the middle voice helps me articulate how grammars of resistance can give rise to alternative relations to the world. In this broader sense, the middle voice becomes relevant and applicable to all languages, regardless of the specifics of grammar

1 *Voice*, strictly speaking, refers to the morphological distinction between active, passive and (previously) middle in grammar, while *diathesis* concerns the semantics of these categories. Since there are no longer exclusive morphological markers for the middle voice in Modern Greek and other modern languages (Manney 2000, 2), one could argue that the middle voice as a distinct category is obsolete in these languages, while its semantics (*diathesis*) are still active. I should note that the studies I have consulted focus on the middle voice in ancient and/or modern Indo-European languages, with a particular focus on Greek. Whether and how grammatical categories akin to the middle voice may be functional in other language families is a fascinating question that falls beyond the scope of this chapter. In this chapter, when I discuss the “middle voice” I refer to the middle *diathesis*, that is, to constructions that convey the *meaning* of the middle voice. I use the term “voice” instead of the more accurate “diathesis” for the sake of simplicity and readability, but also because the theorisations of the middle voice as a discursive and philosophical category that I converse with (see the following section) opt for the term “middle voice” too.

in each language, even though, I contend, modern languages in which the middle diathesis is more common are more prone to accommodate the kind of subjectivity and agency the middle voice enables.

Can the middle voice offer a promising alternative to the seeming necessity of a *krisis* (distinction) between active and passive, perpetrators or victims, subjects or objects, in crisis discourses? How can the middle voice articulate a relation of the subject to the world that resists the worlding mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism? Particularly, how is the middle voice mobilised in contemporary languages of protest and under which conditions can it become a useful conceptual tool in emancipatory struggles? Finally, how does the use of the middle voice in current-day activism modulate and recast the cultural memory of past languages of resistance?

These are big questions that this chapter will only begin to tackle. It will do so by zooming in on the Greek crisis-scape formed by the country's sovereign debt crisis in the years referred to as the "crisis decade" (2009–2018). To broach the questions above, I draw on, and expand, my previous work on the middle voice, in which I explored its potential to thwart crisis rhetoric. There, I analysed works from different genres and media—street art, visual artworks, and literary works—that appeared in Greece during the crisis and mobilised the middle voice to intervene in the dominant rhetoric on the country's crisis in unexpected ways.²

My work on the middle voice in languages of resistance in Greece took shape in the midst of a crisis that was unfolding as I was writing about the contrarian grammars that sprang from it. In this chapter, I bring together wall writings I discussed in light of this framework in different publications, in order to revisit them comparatively as well as from a different vantage point: six years after the purported 'end' of the crisis when Greece exited the international bailout program in August 2018. Although continuing conditions of precarity and structural problems in Greece's economy can easily contradict any claim that Greece has left its crisis era behind, the dominant political narrative in Greece shifted after the declared end of the crisis, to foreground notions of rebuilding, recovery, and happiness (Soudias and Katsinas 2022). I thus examine how these wall writings converse with the present of their emergence, today's context, and the past, i.e., how they recast the cultural memory of the 'pre-crisis' period of the 1990s and early 2000s in Greece, as well as echo, twist, and revise slogans associated with past social movements and cultural objects beyond Greek borders.

2 The present chapter draws on Boletsi 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021.

The next part delineates the middle voice as a conceptual and analytical lens. Asserting its relevance for contesting crisis rhetoric in the context of the Greek crisis, I then scrutinise three wall writings in this context that mobilised the middle voice differently. Each wall writing, as I show here, engaged with a key aspect of *crisis* pertaining to its semantic content, its effects or the alternatives it can foster, specifically:

1. The impact of crisis on subjects' bodies (βασανίζομαι / "I am in torment").
2. Crisis as destruction and the prospect of a new start ("Athens burns").
3. Crisis as context that can engender quotidian utopianism and hope for alternatives ("βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα" / "I am bored imaginatively").

In the last part, I address the resonance of these writings today, after the declared end of the Greek crisis, as they become part of the cultural memory of the 'crisis decade.' Returning to the first writing, *βασανίζομαι*—the most iconic wall writing of the crisis—I reflect on the way it intervenes in the public sphere today, within a new political narrative in Greece marked by a rhetoric of rebuilding, growth, and the promise of happiness.

2 Middle Voice: From Grammar to Theory and Philosophy³

The question of agency is central in studies of the middle voice. According to Émile Benveniste, in the middle voice "the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process, he achieves something which is being achieved in him" (Benveniste 1971, 149; Pecora 1991, 211). Other linguists, however, argue that both in ancient and Modern Greek, for example, the main function of middle inflected verbs is encoding an "agentless" or "anticausative event."⁴ According to Linda Manney, the inflectional middle voice in Modern Greek tends to "encode absence or attenuation of agency" (2000, 22). The primary meaning of the Indo-European middle voice, Jan Gonda claims, was to render an "event which occurs with respect to, rather than *because of*, the entity encoded as subject," and thus an event that usually does not result "from the subject's volitional effort" (Gonda presented in Manney 2000, 23; emphasis added). The subject, in other words, is affected by the event, but is not necessarily the agent causing it. Consequently, the cause of the action is often equivocal, obscured

3 This theoretical part draws partly on Boletsi 2016, 11–13 and 2021, 41 and links my previous theorisation of the middle voice with Rosa's theory of resonance.

4 For this function in Modern Greek, see Vassilaki 1988 and Manney 2000, 22–23, and in ancient Greek, Gonda 1960 (discussed in Manney).

or impossible to identify: the middle voice foregrounds the action itself rather than the cause or agent behind it.

Within and beyond linguistics, literary, social, and cultural theorists and philosophers, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Vincent Pecora, Giorgio Agamben, Luce Irigaray, and Hartmut Rosa, have extended the conceptual reach of the middle voice by theorizing it as a discursive or expressive mode and, more broadly even, as a mode of relating to the self, others, and the world. In poststructuralist thought, particularly in Barthes, Derrida, and White, the middle voice denotes an area of undecidability that resists binary oppositions, such as those between transitive and intransitive or active and passive (LaCapra 2001, 20). As Derrida notes, Western philosophy repressed the grammar of the middle voice, which it “distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression” (1982, 9). The middle voice thus becomes coextensive with his notion of *différance*, which disrupts the logocentrism of Western metaphysics and the idea of an autonomous subject at the origin of speech. The middle voice is the operation eclipsed by the active/passive opposition, and, by extension, it signifies the liminal space that any binary represses.

Anthropologist Jean-Pierre Vernant relates the disappearance of the middle voice in the West with the evolution in Western thinking of “the idea of the human subject as agent, the source of actions, creating them, assuming them, carrying responsibility for them.” This “vocabulary of the will” and the idea of an “agent being the source of his action” are missing from ancient Indo-European languages that use the middle voice (Vernant in Barthes 1972, 152). Consequently, we may assume that many modern linguists interpret the *obscuring* of the agent in middle-voice constructions as *absence* of agency, because they follow the dominant Western conception of agency as the intentional action of a willing subject. As I will show, the middle voice does not fully eclipse agency but invites us to rethink it in different terms, beyond modernity’s sovereign subject.

The suppression of the middle voice in modernity can thus be correlated with a new conception of the subject and its relation to the world, marked by the drive to dominate. Here is where Hartmut Rosa’s notion of *resonance* and its affinity with the middle voice enter the discussion. What constitutes “good life” for Rosa lies in “the quality of *one’s relationship to the world*, i.e. the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world,” which is never only a matter of individual disposition but “always socioeconomically and socioculturally mediated” (2019, 6). In late modernity, Rosa detects “a dysfunction in the relationship between subjects and the world” (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 152), marked by an “aggressive attitude of dominance

and control” (155) and manifest in “the three great crises” of our time: “the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psychological crisis (as manifested, for example, in ever-growing rates of burnout)” (Rosa 2019, 3). The divide “between passivity and activity, between omnipotence and powerlessness” is a key symptom of this crisis and is registered in “the separation between active (but alienating) production and generally passive (but autonomously experienced) consumption” (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 152). The active attitude of dominance thus leads subjects to alienation and “ultimately turns [them] into passive victims” and mere consumers (156). Rosa’s resonance theory, developed in his eponymous study (2016/2019) and subsequent publications, proposes an alternative relation to the world, away from the imperatives of growth, escalation, and optimisation of resources (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 141–42; 2019, 1–3). As an experience, resonance involves a two-directional movement of “reaching out and being reached”: a moment of being affectively touched, addressed or moved by something or someone and a moment of responding to this as an “outwardly directed motion.” But it also involves “*transformation*” and a “constitutive *uncontrollability*” (154). The experience of transformation—a moment of vibrating energy that makes us “feel alive” (Latour 2013, 300–7; Rosa 2016, 552–60)—“presupposes [...] that the other is experienced and accepted as *different*”: this encounter with difference can generate “tension and disturbance” (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 154). There is no way to predict or control the outcome of this “open-ended and resonant interaction” and its effect on the subject (155).

The middle voice captures the attitude that a resonant relation to the world requires. Although in his study on resonance (2016/2019) Rosa does not relate it to the middle voice, he draws this link in more recent publications. Resonance, he writes, “is not so much something that the subject does or seeks than something the subject *allows to happen*” in an encounter with people, objects, ourselves or the world in general. A resonant “encounter does not start with an agency, but with ‘patience,’ with an active receptivity” (2023, 3). The middle voice thus becomes “a way of participating or being involved in an event of activity in which the subject is neither the perpetrator nor the victim” (152). Confounding the victim / perpetrator binary does not (necessarily) mean escaping responsibility or giving up agency. The middle voice articulates “a form of *being-in-the-world*” whereby subjects “experience themselves as being neither omnipotent nor powerless, but rather *as semi-empowered*” (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 152–53).⁵

5 As examples of experiences in which this entwinement of passive and active manifests itself, Rosa mentions “*listening to music,*” *love* or dancing, which involve something we do but also happens to us (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 153).

Rosa's theory broadens the middle voice into a mode of relating to the world. This, I argue, becomes particularly relevant in mobilisations of the middle voice in protest—as with the cases that take centre stage in this essay. Protest emerges from discontent with the status quo, with the conditions of being-in-the-world and the (social) relations these entail. Alternative modes of relating to the world and imagining our social realities are at the heart of protest movements. Therefore, including *resonance* in my theorisation of the middle voice in languages of protest enables a better understanding of *how* grammars of resistance can foster such alternative relations to the world.

But how can the precarious agency, limited autonomy, and muddled distinction between sender/receiver or victim/perpetrator advance emancipatory projects or protest movements, which traditionally rest on claims to autonomy and self-determination as well as on clear positions of accountability? Can the kind of agency and relation to the world that the middle voice fosters be effective in languages of protest today? How does the middle voice intervene in hegemonic discourses of crisis and their propensity for binary distinctions—active versus passive, innocence versus guilt, mastery versus victimhood? And how does it recast the memory of past languages of protest?

To broach these questions, I turn to three wall-writings that intervened in the Greek crisis-scape during the country's debt crisis. This was a decade-long (and in many ways still ongoing) period in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (2007–2008). It was marked by bailout loans, harsh austerity measures imposed by the 'troika' (the International Monetary Fund, Eurogroup, and European Central Bank), failed negotiations with the EU that nearly led to a Grexit in 2015, severe conditions of impoverishment and unemployment, the disintegration of Greece's health, social welfare, and education systems, and intense socio-political unrest and protest.

3 On Suffering (*vasanizome*)

Although popular narratives of the Greek crisis took different forms nationally and internationally, they generally followed two tendencies, as I previously argued, which cast the (Greek) subject as either active or passive.⁶ On the one hand, we find the moralistic narrative of the tax-evading, lazy, hedonistic, money-squandering Greeks who brought the crisis upon themselves and are thus deemed guilty and deserving of their plight. In this representational

6 These two paragraphs on dominant narratives of the Greek crisis draw on a more detailed account in Boletsi 2016, 8–11, as well as Boletsi 2019, 434–35 and 2021, 39–40. My discussion of *vasanizome* draws on, and expands, my analysis in Boletsi 2016.

mode, which typified neoliberal narratives during the Eurozone crisis, the Greeks were seen as active agents, responsible for the crisis but also in need of European patronage. A nation was judged guilty for irresponsible behaviour, while systemic conditions, state mechanisms or the workings of finance capitalism were largely eclipsed (Abbas 2015; Douzinas 2010, 289; Graeber 2011, 229). On the other hand, narratives of the crisis as systemic, mostly from the Left, mobilised the trope of passive victimhood, presenting Greeks as victims of a bankrupt political system or of finance capitalism or pawns in a globalised system that neutralises resistance and cancels the subject's agency.

These accounts drew on two versions of subjectivity: the former rested on the idea of the autonomous, free-willed liberal subject, master of their destiny, and the latter on the subject as determined by discursive or ideological forces beyond their control. The former narrative, which was the predominant one, legitimised austerity measures and a punitive attitude towards Greeks (from the perspective of the European North). The grammar of autonomous subjectivity is, of course, indispensable to neoliberal crisis rhetoric: finance capitalism needs to sustain the illusion of free will, so that it can expand uninhibited, while its destructive material effects can be attributed to 'irresponsible' individuals or nations.

My research into the middle voice in relation to the Greek crisis-scape started with what I would call—borrowing Rosa's concept—a resonant encounter with a wall writing in the streets of my hometown, Thessaloniki, in 2011, as the effects of Greece's financial crisis on the country's population and infrastructure were becoming increasingly pervasive. The wall writing affected me in a way I could not quite understand at the time. My research into the middle voice thus emerged from my attempt to verbalise and theorise the transformative encounter this wall writing issued. The writing featured the verb *βασανίζομαι* (*vasanizome*), which can be best translated as "I am in torment" although other (partial) translations with "I suffer," "I torture/torment myself" or "I am (being) tortured/tormented" are also possible. This wall writing could be found everywhere, in different sizes and versions, in Athens, Thessaloniki, and other cities: on the walls of buildings, staircases, public monuments, benches, garbage containers, windows of deserted buildings and bankrupt businesses, half-hidden or conspicuously standing out (Figures 11.1 and 11.2). It appeared in different sizes—from a 'signature' at the bottom of other graffiti to covering the whole wall of a building. The word was usually written with the same calligraphy (with some exceptions), followed either by three ellipsis marks or a full stop. Its circulation moved from public sites to the digital spaces of the Internet, where images of the writing were collected, reflected upon, and even parodied or mixed with humorous references on websites, blogs, and social media platforms. Although I could not determine its initiator, its vast



FIGURE 11.1 Version of the wall writing *vasanizome* in Stadiou street, Athens, 2014
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 11.2 Version of *vasanizome*, Thessaloniki, 2012
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR

proliferation leaves no doubt that it soon started to be spread by various individuals and street artists. Thus, the original intention behind this wall writing does not necessarily match the many functions it assumed in the Greek urban landscape as the most iconic wall writing of the crisis.

How did *vasanizome* intervene in dominant crisis rhetoric? To understand its intervention, we should trace the workings of the middle voice within it. In many political wall-writings, there is an identifiable addressee, who is marked as the perpetrator and represents a site of power (e.g., in slogans against the police or the state). In *vasanizome*, however, there is no explicit or tacit ‘you.’ The message is introspective and communicates something about the condition of the subject affected by the action, i.e., suffering. This is typical for middle voice constructions, to which *vasanizome* belongs. The agent causing the torment remains ambiguous: it could be the subject itself—as in “I am tormenting myself”—or an undefined agent—as in “I am (being) tormented” by someone else. The subject could either be responsible for the suffering or the victim of another tormentor. The middle voice obscures the *cause* of the action to foreground the *action* itself. In the face of dominant narratives of the Greek crisis that revolved around the attribution of blame—a tendency captured in the popular catchphrase “blame game” in that context—*vasanizome* disrupts the obsession with the crisis as a *judgment of error* and forces us to pause on the *experience* of suffering. A blogger wrote about *vasanizome* in 2012:

Nobody knows for sure who is behind this, nor what its initial concept was. Now, however, we suspect that it exists in order to remind us that we are not suffering alone. It’s there in order to divide our insecurities, our sorrows, our guilt, our disappointments into a million pieces, so that we each get one of these pieces and breathe, even for that short moment when we face it!⁷

The encounter with *vasanizome* that this blogger describes may, at first sight, suggest a form of fragmentation (“a million pieces”) but it is, in fact, the opposite: it is what Rosa calls a resonant experience that affectively connects the writing not only with the viewer but also with several other (past, present, and future) viewers in a community that finds its basis in the *sharing* of suffering (“our insecurities, our sorrows, our guilt, our disappointments”). The experience of being able to momentarily *breathe* in the moment of this encounter (“when we face it”) suggests a shift from a state of suffocation and alienation

⁷ My translation from the Greek. The entry could be found at <http://olaveria.blogspot.nl/2012/05/graffiti.html> but the blog was recently removed.

from the world to a transformed relation whereby the subject is moved, responds to the address and undergoes a transformative experience that connects it to others through shared suffering. The middle voice, Luce Irigaray writes, is “an opportunity for us to inhabit ourselves,” to make “our body itself speak, which then affects itself, is moved, unites with itself” by being open to difference and to others (2017, 50). In the experience that *vasanizome* triggers, private suffering spills over to the public realm and becomes political, not only as the state of the crisis-stricken population, but also as a basis for a community grounded in *vulnerability*.

In their volume *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Butler, Gambetti, and Subsay challenge dominant views of vulnerability as victimisation, passivity, lack of agency, and “the site of inaction” (2016, 1). Dislodging vulnerability from the grammar of the passive voice, they reclaim it as a potential site of agency and even a condition “of the very possibility of resistance” to power, especially (though not exclusively) in feminist politics (1, 3). This rapprochement between vulnerability, agency, and resistance can only take place beyond the active/passive binary—a binary that traditionally ties activity to masculinity and passivity to femininity (3).⁸ Vulnerability and bodily exposure are not only “perilous” but also “enabling” and can generate “new modes of collective agency” (1, 7) that move away from “masculinist fantasies of sovereign mastery” (3). As austerity politics and biopolitical forms of governance assume control over citizens’ bodies, *vasanizome* projects the vulnerable body as a potential site of resistance through a form of agency that is both passive and active.

The vulnerable subject that *vasanizome* produces is neither autonomous and in control nor defeated and disempowered. The verb’s present tense projects both duration and open-endedness. It emphasises prolonged suffering, casting crisis as a systemic condition that produces suffering without the prospect of resolution—what Lauren Berlant called “crisis ordinary” (2011, 10). However, it also suggests an open-ended process of becoming through which new subjectivities may emerge. The ellipsis marks in most renditions of the wall writing enhance this openness. The full stop also used in several versions of *vasanizome* works differently: it visually casts the present at a standstill, projecting the inescapability of the suffering. But as a visual stumbling block, it also forces passersby to pause and engage with the writing in a resonant encounter.

8 Although the authors do not use the term “middle voice,” their emphasis on moving beyond the active/passive binary to conceive alternative accounts of subjectivity, agency, and resistance is tied to my delineation of the middle voice here.

The workings of each rendition of *vasanizome* shifted depending on its formal features and the topography in which it appeared: the neighbourhood, the sites it was written on, and its interaction with other graffiti on the same surfaces. Its dissemination on the internet produced an even broader array of serious, ludic, and critical appropriations. Although presenting these appropriations is beyond the scope of this chapter,⁹ I discuss one adaptation because it connects *vasanizome* with the memory of cultural expressions, attitudes, and practices that predated the crisis era.

The adaptation at hand is a stencil graffiti I encountered in Kolokotroni street in Athens in 2014, which had been displayed there since (at least) 2012.¹⁰ The graffiti featured the face of Lefteris Pantazis, a Greek singer of *skyladika* (“dog music”), a popular Greek music genre (a type of folk music) associated with low-quality entertainment and decadent nightclubs.¹¹ The singer-figure winks and points at passersby with his index fingers. Above his head we read the verb *βασανίσου* (*vasanisou*), which is the same verb as *vasanizomai* but in the second person singular imperative: “torment/torture yourself.” *Vasanisou* is a famous line Pantazis (still) uses during his performances in nightclubs, which predates the crisis. With this line, Pantazis playfully prompts his (mainly female) dancing audience to indulge in the lustful ‘torment’ triggered by his songs. In the graffiti’s recontextualisation of the singer’s line amidst the crisis, the connotation of sensual pleasure becomes a sinister address to the population suffering from the effects of the crisis and austerity measures. A 2012 newspaper article that discusses this graffiti points out this reversal: if *vasanisou* sounds pleasant in *skyladika* establishments, in the graffiti, it “epitomizes the current Greek reality,” as it sounds like the message of the ‘troika,’ compelling citizens to torture themselves through the one-way street of austerity (“To pe to pe” 2012, n.pag.).¹² Although both *vasanizome* and *vasanisou* are, linguistically and semantically, middle voice constructions, in *vasanizome* there is no separate addressee, while the imperative in *vasanisou* distinguishes the addresser from the addressee: the singer, as a personification of power—be it the ‘troika,’ the Greek state or finance capitalism—orders citizens to torment themselves. Consequently, the one in power exerts violence while evading accountability for the violence and suffering, which is disguised as self-inflicted. The middle voice exposes the “blaming-the-victim” logic of power: a situation whereby the

9 For an analysis of diverse versions of *vasanizome*, see Boletsi 2016, 14–22.

10 A 2012 newspaper article discusses this graffiti. At <https://www.dimokratia.gr/ellada/213724/to-pe-to-pe-to-pe-o-papagalos/>.

11 I analyse this graffiti in detail in Boletsi 2016, 20–22. Here, I involve it in my discussion of *vasanizome* in order to explore the wall writing’s connection both with the pre-crisis era and with the following wall writing, “Athens Burns” (see next section).

12 My translation from the Greek.

addresser is absolved of responsibility or guilt while the addressees are ordered to subject themselves to torment and to the guilt of causing it.

The graffiti's evocation of *skyladika*—a popular entertainment form involving dancing, flower-throwing and plate-smashing—perversely connects the population's suffering during the crisis with the cliché of the fun-loving, unrestrained Zorba-like Greek who prefers to enjoy life rather than to work. This association evokes the popular narrative of the European North that the 'lazy Greeks' are responsible for the crisis while hard-working northern Europeans pay the bill. The figure who issues the order *vasanisou* sadistically turns the nation's *jouissance* (the positive connotations of *vasanisou*) into the nation's suffering, suggesting a causal link between the two, inflected by the above clichés. Through the middle voice, the graffiti illustrates the neoliberal governmentality of crisis, whereby the figure of power conceals its involvement in people's suffering by suggesting that their own excesses precipitated their demise.

The way this graffiti links *vasanizome* with mass entertainment and attitudes that typify the pre-crisis era of the 1990s and early 2000s—often presented as a period of national euphoria—has further implications, which I explore in the next section through a comparative reading with another wall writing: "Athens Burns."

4 On Burning (*Athens Burns*)

High unemployment rates, impoverishment, and austerity politics during the crisis sparked intense protests across the country, particularly between 2010 and 2012, expressing people's anger "at the perceived turning of Greece into a 'debt colony'" (Plantzos 2015, 195). Many protests, including the Greek "Indignant Citizens Movement" (*Aganaktismenoi*), who gathered at the Syntagma Square in Athens in the spring/summer of 2011, incorporated creative forms of activism that eschewed conventional party politics. However, hostility towards the state was also expressed through riots that at times involved acts of destruction and vandalism. The anti-austerity riots in May 2010, which followed a nationwide strike and massive demonstration, were particularly intense, culminating in the death of three bank employees after protesters set fire to the building of a bank. The slogan "Athens Burns" was prominent in the 2010 riot (and subsequent ones) as writing on Athenian walls and other public sites (e.g., bus signs).¹³

13 The starting point for my analysis in this section is a very brief discussion of this writing in Boletsi 2016, 25.

As a middle voice construction, *Athens Burns* obscures the agent of destruction, drawing attention to the burning itself. In an obvious way, one can identify the rioters as the agents, who put cars, banks, and shops on fire, but the literal burning is also a metaphor for Greece's destruction following neoliberal austerity politics, which incited the riots. The equivocality of the phrase also extends to the signifying force of the fire, which can denote both aimless destruction and an act of purging: setting the old bankrupt structures of society on fire is—possibly from the rioters' perspective—necessary as a means of discarding bankrupt structures in order to build a different structure from the ashes of the old.

The idea of destruction as a prerequisite for a new start can be traced in many past protest cultures echoed by this slogan. The slogan connects with the memory of recent protest cultures and social movements through the classic punk song "Babylon Is Burning" (1979) by the British band The Ruts (Peacock 2021). Offering a sinister take on the "new beginning" slogan of the 1979 Conservative Party manifesto in Britain, the song captured the spirit of social unrest that would also animate the British riots of 1981 and other social movements protesting the conservative turn of the 1980s in Britain and elsewhere. "Babylon Is Burning" responded to the socio-economic, political, and cultural tensions of the late 1970s, a time in which free market economics and social conservatism took over, undoing decades of liberal reforms (Worley 2016, 220). The song, and punk music's social commentary in general, turned against a repressive system that fostered social inequalities, alienation, commodification, and boredom and "provided an enveloping context to the upheavals of 1980–81" in Britain (226). The 1981 riots across British cities, particularly—a manifestation of "youthful frustration, social disadvantage and racial tension" (218)—were framed by the press in terms of burning too, with newspapers providing daily reports of "Burning Britain" (217).

"Babylon Is Burning" casts the anarchic, destructive spirit that was attributed to punk music back at society: through the biblical reference, corruption, disintegration, and destruction are attributed to capitalist society rather than its enemies. Society is already being destroyed, and the rioters' fires are making that more visible and literal. *Athens Burns* conveys a similar critique in the context of the 2010 riots amidst the country's crisis and social disintegration. The message carries an ambivalence, which could be better understood by comparing *Athens Burns* to the call issued in the title of the first Athens Art Biennale in 2007: "Destroy Athens!" This (metaphorical) call to artists to 'destroy' the city came shortly before the crisis when signs of financial downturn and "acute socio-economic disparities" were already clear (Leventis 2013, 5). As a message cast in the middle voice, *Athens Burns* works differently from

the Biennial's call, which is issued in the active voice. In *Athens Burns* the agent of the burning is diffuse. Who is doing the burning? Is it the rioters, the Greek state, the troika and its anti-austerity politics or neoliberal capitalism? Is the city burning by its own hand in an act of self-immolation that eerily evokes the increased suicide rates in crisis-stricken Greece, including acts of public suicide?¹⁴

The verb's form in the simple present ("burns") rather than the present continuous of "Babylon is Burning," also warrants attention, as it may extend the writing's intertextual web further back in time. It evokes the great fire that destroyed Rome in 64 CE when Nero was emperor, which has entered popular memory through the expression "Nero fiddled while Rome burned" (Gyles 1947, 211).¹⁵ The phrase—which captures a legend rather than a historically accurate event—criticizes someone who takes a perverse, "sadistic pleasure in the terrible misfortunes of others" and neglects their duties in times of crisis, even when they may have caused this crisis (211). *Athens Burns* can also be read as a critique towards the irresponsible, even sadistic attitude of the 'sovereign' amidst the country's crisis. Nevertheless, it suggests another relation between the sovereign and the city, and a different take on responsibility from the aforementioned phrase. The obscuring of the agent causing the burning may seem like a means of *evading* responsibility, yet what it does, I contend, is foreground the impossibility of escaping both the consequences of the act and responsibility for it. In other words, the middle voice here sets a fire, from which no-one can escape—not even Nero himself. In this way, it hints at the impossibility of protesting from a position *outside* the system in the era of globalised capitalism. In the post-1989 world, the universalisation of neoliberal capitalism makes *external* positions of resistance no longer viable. If, as Hardt and Negri have argued (2000), there is no outside to the global Empire today, we need to create other loci of resistance from the inside, through interventions that use the system's tools differently in order to create new grammars of political intervention. By making it possible to involve different actors in the burning, the middle voice projects an "implicated subject" (to use Michael Rothberg's term, 2019). It thus reaches out to all citizens, inciting them to resist the social conditions of their lives.

14 For example, a 77-year-old retired pharmacist shot himself in public in 2012 outside the parliament in Athens, and an indebted 55-year man set himself on fire outside a bank in Thessaloniki in 2011. See <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/greek-man-sets-himself-on-fire-idUSRTR2REV6/> and <https://jp.reuters.com/article/greece-suicide-idINDEE8330JF20120404/>.

15 I am grateful to the volume's editors for suggesting the potential association of the wall writing with Nero and the burning of Rome.

Athens Burns can still be found in Athenian public space (often accompanied by the anarchist symbol), though less frequently than in the early crisis years. The slogan has a transnational reach in protest cultures, even though the verb's subject shifts (e.g., Paris, Babylon, Athens). During the 2018 protests in Paris, for example, in which the *gilets jaunes* played a central role, the wall writing "Babylon is Burning" (in English) could be seen along the Avenue Kléber near the Arc de Triomphe.¹⁶

Another important aspect of this slogan, which fosters an unexpected connection with *vasanizome*, is its *libidinal investment*, which is inextricable from the symbolism of the fire. Fire signifies not only destruction but life itself: a life that involves energy, risk, and the prospect of change, in contrast with the boredom of a consumerist lifestyle. The slogan's libidinal charge animates its association with the memory of another community in crisis through Jenni Livingston's well-known documentary "Paris is Burning" (1990), filmed through the mid-to-late 1980s. Exploring New York's African-American and Latino gay and drag communities, the documentary registered the end of the "Golden Age" of drag balls in New York. As in the other slogans, the "burning"—a reference to the "Paris Is Burning" annual ball by drag performer Paris Duprée—carries a doubleness: it meshes the libidinal charge of the exuberant spectacle, extravagance, and euphoria of the ball competitions with issues of social and family rejection, homophobia, hatred, violence, racism, poverty, and the spectre of AIDS that haunted many of the film's subjects, etching their experiences into the collective memory of that generation (Levy 2006).

In the Greek context, we already encountered a strange mixture of suffering and eroticisation in the first wall writing, *vasanizome*, through its connection to *skyladika* music. The same connection can be traced in *Athens Burns*. The Greek word for "burning" can denote extravagant entertainment. The Greek phrase "θα το κάψουμε!" (literally, "we'll burn it down!") is used for excessive partying. Along these lines, *Athens Burns* refers to the destruction of the crisis-period, but also triggers the memory of the 'affluent' Greek 1990s. To elucidate the way it mediates this memory, I turn to a scene from the iconic 1990s Greek film *Όλα είναι δρόμος* (*It's a Long Road*, 1998) by Pantelis Voulgaris. The film is a triptych comprising three stories, all taking place in Northern Greece, in Greece's more economically depressed and largely rural regions. The film's climax is a scene in the third story, appropriately called "Vietnam" after the name of the *skyladiko* nightclub that the protagonist frequents. Makis, a lonely,

16 These riots started in reaction to the fuel taxes and turned into a large-scale anti-government movement that involved riots and the burning of cars, buildings, and barricades (Chrisafis 2018).

recently divorced middle-aged man who owns a furniture business, is unable to get over the fact that his wife left him (owing to his infidelities), taking their child with her. To drown his sorrows, he visits a trashy *skyladiko* night-club in the middle of nowhere. After trashing the joint in a Bacchic frenzy—breaking plates, sprinkling the singer with rose petals, even tearing the tiles from the toilets—he decides to destroy the place to the ground. He negotiates a price with the nightclub owner, gives him a check with all his money, and calls someone with a bulldozer. The party moves outside the nightclub, where the bulldozer starts demolishing the club while the musicians continue playing in the open air. Makis drenches his trench coat with whiskey and sets it on fire while wearing it and dancing a solo ‘zebekiko’ dance.¹⁷ As the sun rises in the distance, Makis and his blazing trench coat disappear into the fields.

The scene, which has assumed cult status in Greek cinema, hints at the extreme face of the Greek mentality of the 1990s, a period of the *metapolitefsi* era¹⁸ marked by consumerism, individualism, the spreading of media culture, and a populist political system grounded in clientelism, excessive state expenditure, and borrowing, all of which undoubtedly contributed to the 2009 crisis. A product of this mentality, Makis spends all his money not to produce something but only to destroy an infrastructure (in the process, leaving, we may assume, the nightclub’s several employees out of work) just because he can. The destructive side of this attitude assumes a self-destructive dimension—he sets himself on fire—which in the film’s scene is tied to a form of *jouissance*, in a striking performance of macho masculinity. The protagonist’s inability to foster what Rosa calls “resonant” relationships with others (he is alienated from his family) is linked to a lifestyle of pointless consumerism, which in the film goes awry, reveals its (self-)destructive face, and moves to the other side. His hedonistic, macho performance is ultimately also an act of willingly ridding himself of all his money and property as he walks, purged by the fire, into the fields, perhaps towards a new start.

Through their unexpected associations with the mass entertainment of *skyladika* and its decadent, sexualised connotations, both *vasanizome* and *Athens Burns* echo these attitudes that have shaped the collective memory of the Greek 1990s and early 2000s. The practices of smashing plates and throwing money or flower petals at singers in *skyladika* clubs capture the (eroticised) excess of these attitudes. The two wall-writings thus subversively

17 A popular solo Greek dance, traditionally performed by men and involving improvised, circular movements.

18 *Metapolitefsi* (regime change) refers to the era in Greek history since the fall of the military dictatorship of 1967–74.

recast these practices, revealing their (self-)destructive sides, which became palpable in the crisis period: when the momentary *jouissance* recedes, suffering and ashes remain after the burning.

What kind of relation between the present of crisis and the ‘pre-crisis’ era does the middle voice negotiate in these writings? By being inside the action, the subject cannot occupy a safe external position away from the consequences of the process in question: the one who burns is also burned. This “topology” of the middle voice, in which, Agamben notes, “the subject does not stand over the action but is himself the place of its occurring” (2016, 28), yields a nonlinear temporality. While in the active and passive the verb denotes a temporal separation between the beginning and completion of the action, in the middle voice, White writes, “actions and their effects are conceived to be simultaneous; past and present are integrated” (White 2010, 260). In the wall writings, the meshing of *jouissance*, suffering, and destruction muddles the distinction between the pre-crisis and crisis eras, foregrounding their continuities. Through these writings, the *vasanisou* of popular singers or the euphoric destruction and fire of the protagonist in Voulgaris’s film retrospectively become preambles of their sinister offshoots during the crisis, suggesting the two eras as co-constitutive. The writings thus critically recast key elements of the cultural memory of the pre-crisis years by inflecting them through their aftereffects in the crisis-ridden present.

5 On Imaginative Boredom (*varieme effantasta*)

Vasanizome and *Athens Burns* open up a space for alternative conceptions of subjectivity and agency based on shared vulnerability. The third wall writing in this constellation encapsulates another take on the experience of the crisis and the imagination of alternatives: “βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα” (*varieme effantasta*).¹⁹ The verb *βαριέμαι* (*varieme*) means “I am bored” while the adverb *ευφάνταστα* (*effantasta*) can refer either to creative imagination or to making up stories and lies. It can thus be translated as “I am bored imaginatively / fancifully.” The verb is a middle voice construction, as the subject is involved in the process (being bored). In fact, I contend that the phrase as a whole is cast in a middle voice modality: passivity and inaction (boredom) are correlated with creativity and imagination, yielding a subject both passive and active, disempowered and empowered.

19 My discussion of this writing here is a succinct version of my analysis in Boletsi 2020, enriched with new insights.



FIGURE 11.3 Version of the wall writing *varieme effantasta*, Exarcheia neighborhood, Athens, 2010
 PHOTOGRAPH BY (ANONYMOUS) BLOGGER (AT [HTTPS://THESTRANGER.WORDPRESS.COM/2010/11/11/LOG116/](https://thestranger.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/LOG116/))

This writing also appeared during the crisis, though it did not have the wide circulation that *vasanizome* did. I was able to trace two renditions of it in Athens, but it is very likely that there were more (Figure. 11.3). I take 2010 as a *terminus post quem* for its appearance, which is when a blogger posted an image of it on his blog.²⁰ “Being bored” could refer to the boredom of a consumerist lifestyle or to the enforced inactivity of unemployment that spiked in the crisis years, with youth unemployment peaking at 59,5% in 2013.²¹ The writing’s association with unemployment is more in tune with the Athenian neighbourhood of Exarcheia, where it appeared, which is home to many unemployed youth and has a history of protest, clashes with the police, and resistance to

20 For the entry and an image of the wall writing, see <https://thestranger.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/LOG116/>. I traced another version of the writing in Athens in 2014.

21 Data from a 2015 European Parliament Briefing: “Youth Unemployment in Greece: Situation Before the Government Change” at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/542220/IPOL_BRI\(2015\)542220_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/542220/IPOL_BRI(2015)542220_EN.pdf).

power. A blogger who posted a photo of the wall writing in his “Diary of an unemployed” on November 11, 2010, describes his encounter with the writing during his idle walk as an unemployed ‘flaneur’ in Exarcheia.²² The writing invests the assumed passivity of unemployment with the ‘activity’ of creative imagination, which holds the possibility of resisting conditions of precarity and social disposability. But what are the terms of this resistance?

The phrase twists the common Greek phrase *βαριέμαι αφάνταστα* (*varieme afantasta*), which means “I am unimaginably bored,” that is, bored to death. In the wall writing, the prefix *a-* (indicating *lack*) is replaced with the prefix *εύ-* (*ef-*), indicating something positive. This replacement reinstates the imagination (*fantasia*) that is only present by negation in *afantasta*. The late-capitalist ennui of an “unimaginable boredom” gives way to an imaginative use of that boredom that twists the conditions that induced it to generate the prospect of another mode of living. If the criteria for ‘good life’ and prosperity in neoliberal societies are “fixated on (economic) growth and expansion” that, in turn, engender alienation and boredom by turning subjects into passive consumers (Rosa in Rosa and Reckwitz 2023, 150, 156), *varieme effantasta* revises the terms of this ‘good life.’ It invests precarious subjects with the capacity to dream, imagine, and positively twist conditions of abjection through their only possession: time. Time, the writing suggests, can be used *imaginatively* instead of *productively* as part of a person’s capital.

Imaginative boredom suggests a disengagement from what Lauren Berlant calls the “cruel optimism” of attachments to “upward mobility,” “job security,” and other “conventional good-life fantasies” that prove untenable within the normalisation of crisis in neoliberal capitalism (2011, 2). Since in crisis-stricken Greece such attachments became “*more* fantasmatic with less and less relation to how people live” (11), the word *effantasta* reclaims the “fantasmatic” from the affective structure of cruel optimism for a quotidian utopianism *within* and *against* the conditions of late capitalism. The phrase questions the neoliberal demands of productivity and acceleration that breed acquiescence and consumerism. Reconfiguring boredom into an experience that breeds imagination, it exchanges the cruel attachment to “good-life fantasies” for a *stasis*—the suspended action boredom suggests—that instils a whiff of utopianism in the condition of chronic crisis Berlant calls “crisis ordinary” (2011, 10).

Tapping into various repositories of the memory of protest, *varieme effantasta* converses with domestic, transnational, and transhistorical interlocutors. It subscribes to what Harry Cleaver called “the struggle against work,” resisting

22 See note 21.

“the endless subordination to work in order to gain space, time and energy to elaborate alternatives” (2015, 82). In a precarious public sphere marked by “unfulfilling jobs and stagnant wages,” there are more and more proposals for “a post-work world,” issued from socialist, feminist, and environmentalist perspectives (Lynskey 2020). In the same spirit, the writing echoes Guy Debord’s famous wall-writing “Ne travaillez jamais” (“Never work”), painted on a wall on the Rue de Seine in Paris in 1952. It also resonates with another wall writing in Greece during the crisis: “Δεν φοβάμαι τίποτα, δεν ελπίζω τίποτα, είμαι άνεργος” (“I fear nothing, I hope nothing, I am unemployed”). The latter paraphrases a famous line by literary author Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957): “I fear nothing. I hope nothing. I am free.”²³ In this wall writing, the association of unemployment with freedom (through the evoked line by Kazantzakis) carries a bitter undertone, but also hints at the potentially positive sides of disengaging from attachments to ‘good life’ and consumerist fantasies. The figure of the unemployed, precarious subject emerges not only as a passive victim but as someone who can opt out of the ‘good life’ narrative of neoliberalism and pursue what Rosa calls more “resonant” modes of relating to the world (Rosa in Reckwitz and Rosa 2023, 156).

The word “fantasia” (imagination) incorporated in “effantasta” activates the memory of the May ’68 slogan “all power to the imagination.” *Variemai effantasta* tries to transfer some of this past utopian energy into the post-1989 world of what Mark Fisher has called “capitalist realism” that precludes the imagination of alternatives (2009). Its utopianism, however, differs from the May ’68 slogan. The wall writing’s subject is *internal* to the late capitalist conditions that induce boredom and thus implicated in the system it resists. If revolutionary utopianism is untenable in our post-revolutionary world, resistance and utopianism require different modalities and grammars. *Varieme effantasta* revises utopianism in a late capitalist context through the middle voice.

Refashioning the “unimaginable boredom” of capitalist realism, the writing fosters a precarious utopian space, akin to what José Esteban Muñoz called “queer utopianism”: an “anticipatory illumination” that helps us sense “the not-yet-conscious” as “a utopian feeling” in certain properties of “representational practices” (2009, 3). Shaped in the middle voice, its utopianism is neither acquiescent nor revolutionary, neither negative nor uncritically positive, but belongs, to borrow Shoshana Felman’s words, “to the scandal of their nonopposition” (2003, 104; quoted in Muñoz 2009, 13).

23 The line is engraved on Kazantzakis’ gravestone (in Greek).

The message's optimism is potentially undercut by the second meaning of *effantasta* as "fanciful." Imaginative boredom may prove to be fanciful: a fake promise for an exit from the governmentality of crisis. The message may thus sound like the fictitious musings of marginalised subjects that pose no real threat to the system. *Varieme effantasta* issues a message with uncertain outcome, without, however, neutralizing the utopian energy that motivates it. The writing projects boredom both as a symptom of capitalist realism and as a potential resource for imagining the *otherwise*.

Rather than naïve optimism, the writing, then, cultivates *hope*. Following Terry Eagleton's definition, hope involves future uncertainty. Optimism for Eagleton is a banal, complacent attitude underpinning the doctrine of Progress and the belief that things will keep improving (even when there is no reason to believe so) (2015, 4–8). By contrast, hope involves the possibility of failure but also the belief in the *possibility* of change, oscillating "between the insistence of the actual and the promise of a future" (87). Hope, Ann Rigney argues, is a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1970, 128–35) which informs civic action and motivates the struggle for a better life, if only in the form of small acts of resistance rather than of revolutionary transformations" (Rigney 2018, 370–71).²⁴ *Varieme effantasta* forms such a small "act of resistance" that rethinks utopianism *within* conditions of late capitalism. While boredom connotes depletion of energy, passivity, acquiescence, compromised agency, here it turns into a resource for imagining different modes of living. This space of imaginative boredom may be ambiguously utopian, if not fanciful, but it activates a "politics of possibility" (Appadurai 2013, 1, 3) through the middle voice, enabling alternative configurations of agency between the (assumed) passivity of boredom and the possibility to act.

6 The Wall Writings' Afterlives beyond the 'Crisis Decade'

Claims that Greece's exit from the bailout program in August 2018 meant the end of the crisis sound bitterly ironic considering persisting conditions of precarity, the structural problems of the Greek economy, and their ramifications in Greek society. If one adds the recession during the COVID-19 pandemic and the frequency of extreme weather events in the past few years causing catastrophic wildfires and floods across the country, crisis in Greece emerges more as an enduring state—with shifting forms—rather than a thing of the past.²⁵

²⁴ Rigney discusses Eagleton's understanding of hope.

²⁵ On the most recent wildfires and floods in 2023, see for example Simmons et al. 2023.

Nevertheless, after the declared end of the crisis in 2018, the dominant political narrative in Greece shifted, in order to foreground notions of rebuilding, recovery, and the promise of happiness. Especially since the conservative right-wing *New Democracy* became the ruling party in July 2019, the Greek public sphere, Dimitris Soudias and Philipp Katsinas claim, has been marked by “a departure from the moralizing discourses of guilt, blame, and debt surrounding the crisis of the past decade” towards “a new imaginary of happiness” (2022, 3) that, according to prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, “Greece can claim.”²⁶ This imaginary of happiness is also part of a rebranding of Greece—geared mainly towards the tourist industry—that “fetishiz[es] and fus[es] its raw beauty, philosophical tradition, antique culture, healthy cuisine, laid-back way of life, and crisis-chic aesthetics into authentic, yet consumable, experiences” (5).

In this discursive framework, what remains from the contrarian, alternative grammar of the wall writings discussed in this chapter? Are they still resonant in Greece today, and if so, how? My focus in this section is on *vasanizome*, which has the most persisting presence as the iconic wall writing of the crisis era. Not only does it still appear on public sites, albeit much less frequently, but it is the only one of these writings that has been amply discussed, appropriated, and creatively adapted in several other media and genres. Soon after its appearance on urban walls it entered Greek literary production. It inspired, for instance, the black comedy play *Vasanizome* by Antonis Tsipianitis (premiere in Athens, June 2012), in which individual and collective suffering converge. The protagonist’s personal crisis (he finds out he is dying of cancer) blends with the economic crisis through the microcosm of his family (Tsardouni 2012). As he escapes the domestic sphere in order to write *vasanizome* on the city’s walls at night, crisis as a bodily disease metaphorically meshes with the financial crisis and collective suffering. Another literary appropriation of *vasanizome* is found in the novella *Κοντά στην κοιλιά* (*Close to the belly*, 2014) by well-known author Sotiris Dimitriou, a satiric narrative about the present and future of the country, balancing between utopia and anti-utopia.²⁷ *Vasanizome* figures in the opening lines as the starting point for Dimitriou’s sketch of the crisis-stricken country and its people, marked by finger-pointing guilt and suffering. Describing the wall writing’s dissemination across Athens, the narrator explains that “it came to be used as a location marker” for finding one’s way in the city (2014, 50). The writing in the novella even turns into a watershed for

26 Mitsotakis quoted in Soudias and Katsinas 2022, 3.

27 In Boletsi 2017, I analyse this novella as a narrative in the middle voice, between utopia and anti-utopia.

dividing history into the pre- and post-*vasanizome* eras, testifying to its central function in the Greek crisis imaginary.

Vasanizome was also transferred from the city's walls to the inner walls of artistic events. It figured, for example, in an installation by British artist Michael Landy, as part of his 2017 exhibition "BREAKING NEWS – ATHENS" at the Diplarion School in Athens. Written on one of the exhibition's walls, the writing became part of Landy's attempt to create a collaborative exhibition about the experiences of the people of Athens, inviting the public to submit images that conveyed their feelings about contemporary Athens and capture "the current state of our society such as news headlines, text messages, aphorisms, symbols, logos, slogans and graffiti."²⁸ *Vasanizome* could not be missing from this artistic archive of the experience of crisis.

The integration of a street artwork into the institutionalised realms of literature and the art world is not common. The wide dissemination and intertextual travels of *vasanizome* validate its prominent place in the crisis imaginary as an object that resonated with the public. These (and other) appropriations, coupled with its appeal on the internet, secured the writing's place in Greek cultural memory through various archives and art forms that fostered new "commemorative vehicles" to secure its continuing resonance (Armstrong and Cragge 2006, 726–27). Its incorporation in these art forms, however, also introduced the risk of its contrarian grammar being neutralised as a hip 'product' of the crisis, which is precisely how the booming street art in Greece was marketed internationally in the crisis years.²⁹

Although the presence of *vasanizome* in public space has subsided, it has not disappeared. In fact, besides some renditions that still remain from the crisis decade, new appearances of the writing also surface regularly. In Thessaloniki, for example, I have found several new instances of *vasanizome* over the past five years (2018–2023; see Figures. 11.4 and 11.5). Recently, it was even spotted on the wall of an underpass in the centre of Tbilisi, in Georgia (Figure. 11.6).³⁰ Although I have not located other renditions beyond Greek borders yet, its presence in Tbilisi—home to a large Greek diaspora—signals a possible transnational network of dissemination that is yet to be explored. How are we to view these new

28 From the description of the exhibition on the website of NEON: <https://neon.org.gr/en/exhibition/breaking-news-athens/>. An image of *vasanizome* as part of this exhibition can be seen on this webpage.

29 Greek street art thrived during the crisis, turning Athens into a "mecca" of street art in Europe (Bikanski 2014). Its international visibility, however, also turned it into an object of 'crisis tourism' and precipitated processes of gentrification in neighborhoods that hosted street art with international appeal (Tzanelli and Korstanje 2016).

30 I am grateful to Carl Mauzy for bringing the Georgian version to my attention and providing the photograph for Fig. 11.6.



FIGURE 11.4 Version of *vasanizome*, Egnatia street, Thessaloniki, 2023
 PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 11.5 Version of *vasanizome*, Egnatia street, Thessaloniki, 2023
 PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.



FIGURE 11.6 Version of *vasanizome*, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2023

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL MAUZY, REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER

appearances in the current Greek landscape in relation to the political narrative of rebuilding, growth, and the promise of good life after the crisis decade?

The new appearances of *vasanizome* carry the memory of the crisis, still inscribed on citizens' bodies and palpable in Greece's ailing infrastructures. They thereby highlight the continuity of crisis and suffering, challenging political narratives that project a different image. Greece's 'post-crisis' happiness narrative, Soudias and Katsinas remark, "camouflages the failures of the capitalist imaginary," while it transfers the weight of any failure to individuals by making happiness dependent on personal choices and satisfied, resilient lifestyles and attitudes (2022, 4). Happiness in this narrative becomes a normative category that, following Sara Ahmed, "rest[s] on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy 'in the right way,'" making sure that "the right people" are the ones with access to it (2010, 13). The presence of *vasanizome* in this context may be seen as a refusal of this narrative and its exclusionary logic, and an attempt to highlight its contradictions.

In that respect, it may be no coincidence that several of the writing's new appearances I have located in Thessaloniki are found at construction sites that involve rebuilding, repair or new infrastructures, and at roadblocks for road

closure or for the suspension of the usual activity of specific sites (Figures. 11.4, 11.5). Public construction projects in Greece are often slow or stagnant, sometimes closing off streets and other sites for months or years without making progress. The most striking case is the Thessaloniki Metro project, which had been under construction since the 1980s, and only opened for the public at the end of 2024. The project faced great delays and interruptions due to factors that include the economic crisis, the bankruptcy of construction companies, and constant changes in the project's design owing to archaeological excavations in the subsoil. Up until 2023, reports suggested that the funding had been 'frozen' and that most contractors remained unpaid and abandoned the project (Dergiades 2023). Even in the first days after its opening, it faced major malfunctions and service disruptions ("First Major Malfunction" 2024). Given this background, the project's description on the website of Elliniko Metro S.A., the state company responsible for its construction, is telling: it presents this as "the largest transport, development and environmental infrastructure project currently under construction in our country" that upon completion will be "the most modern Metro system in Europe," making Thessaloniki "a modern European city."³¹ This notoriously delayed project is reframed through a confident narrative of growth and modernisation of Greece's second largest city. The emphasis on making Thessaloniki "modern" and "European" reflects deep-rooted narratives that link Greece's national project with Europeanisation, modernisation, and (economic) growth. The presence of *vasanizome* on a temporary surface at the metro's construction site on Egnatia street in 2022, I argue, suggests the underside of this imperative of modernisation and the predicament of Greece's "belated modernisation," which "remains 'incomplete'" as it cannot fully duplicate "western prototypes" (Jusdanis 1991, XIII).³²

The contradiction between the Thessaloniki metro's actual state and its official narrative framing hints at the cruel optimism that the country's new narrative cultivates—simply put, the attachment to the promise of happiness, progress, and good life despite the country's disintegrating infrastructures. When such contradictions are exposed, often through catastrophic events, public protest ignites, as in the recent massive demonstrations across the country protesting the systemic failures that led to the deadly rail crash in February 2023, which claimed 57 lives.³³ In this context, I argue, *vasanizome* is not

31 At https://www.emetro.gr/?page_id=4210&lang=en.

32 On narratives of modernisation in relation to Greece, see Jusdanis 1991, Triandafyllidou, Gropas and Kouki 2013, Tziouvas 2021 (among many others).

33 The rail crash was caused by the head-on collision between two trains and exposed the severe shortcomings of Greece's railway system "at the level of operation, human

just part of the memory of crisis, but foregrounds the inconsistencies of *new* dominant narratives and the need for alternatives.

Vasanizome also points to those who are excluded from the national narrative and the claim to ‘happiness’ in Greece today: migrants, refugees, marginalised, impoverished, disabled, queer, and deviant subjects. The political promise of the middle voice for emancipatory struggles lies largely in the possibilities it opens up for articulating positions and experiences of precarious, marginalised subjects. For people who face social invisibility or extreme precarity, depending solely on the active grammar of the willing, sovereign subject could be politically invalidating when the very subject-status of these people is at stake. Spectral people cannot assert their social presence through active, masculinist grammars of the subject as master, as these grammars provide the grounds for their social exclusion (Boletsi 2016, 24). In the space between activity and passivity that *vasanizome* and the other wall writings open up, excluded subjects do not necessarily emerge as passive victims: they may also *refuse* national narratives or neoliberal narratives of ‘good life’ and opt for alternative projects, dreams, and affiliations.

When we view the three wall writings—*vasanizome*, *Athens Burns* and *varieme effantasta*—as a constellation with continuing resonance in today’s Greece and beyond, their challenge to the above-mentioned narratives becomes forceful. *Vasanizome* is not just an expression of “miserabilism” by those “banished from” happiness narratives as “troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy” (Ahmed 2010, 20),³⁴ just as *Athens Burns* is not just a mindless call to destruction. They form a basis for new collectivities that claim agency through vulnerability, and refuse the attachment to living the good life and being ‘happy’ “in the right way” (Ahmed 2010, 13), mobilizing “imaginative boredom” to sustain the political hope for alternatives.

The middle voice, to be sure, is not a panacea for the success of emancipatory projects, resonant relationships, and socio-political critique. Its success as a contrarian grammar is never certain and comes with ethical risks. LaCapra, for example, criticizes a middle voice discourse that muddles the victim/perpetrator distinction, thus eclipsing “the problems of agency and responsibility,” especially in (historical) contexts such as the Holocaust, where such distinctions seem ethically necessary (2001, 26). The potential of the middle

resources and technological equipment” (Kokkinidis 2023). Initial attempts by politicians to attribute the accident to ‘human error’ were met by massive protests and public outrage across the country.

34 Stathis Kalyvas sees “miserabilism” as “the constant whining and misfortune that prevails in public discourse” (Kalyvas and Papastergiou 2021). His views are discussed in Soudias and Katsinas 2022.

voice in emancipatory struggles should therefore be assessed on a case-by-case basis. However, if we want such social struggles to not just reproduce hegemonic grammars, but to creatively reinvent past languages of protest, we need to be attentive to traces of alternative grammars. The wall writings in this chapter project the desire for grammars that do not just register the crisis, but cause a crisis in dominant modes of knowledge production and subject constitution, opening up spaces for different, desired futures.

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Epilogue: Words between Memory and Hope

Ann Rigney

Sometime in the summer, one of the speakers at a meeting of the workers' movement in Paris threw a verbal bombshell. It had been roughly two months since the movement had reasserted its right to hold public meetings, a right that had been curtailed since the revolutionary days of 1848. Attention to the discussion of the rights of women workers was flagging somewhat until Louis Alfred Briosne, a *feuillagiste* by trade, stood up:

Until then, *orators* had opened with the sacramental formula: “Mesdames et messieurs” This speaker, in a clear and sufficiently resonant voice, cried out an appellation that had been deeply forgotten for the last quarter of a century: “Citoyennes et citoyens.” The room erupted in applause. The man who had been welcomed in this fashion probably did not say anything more interesting than the others – what does it matter? By throwing out his ‘citoyens’ he had evoked – on purpose or not, who knows? – a whole world of memories and hopes. Each person present quivered, shivered... The effect was enormous.¹

The scene was recorded by Gustave Lefrançais in his *Souvenirs d'un révolutionnaire* (1913 [1902], 300). I recall it here because it exemplifies the power of language to create an event in the strong sense of an open-ended moment of new possibilities (Wagner-Pacifici 2017). Uttering the words ‘citoyennes et citoyens’ changed something in the room.²

In her study of the Paris Commune, where I first encountered this passage, Kristin Ross describes this speech event as marking a crucial tear in the social

1 ‘Jusqu’alors les *orateurs* ont débuté par la formule sacramentelle: “Mesdames et messieurs.”/Celui-ci jette, d’une voix claire et suffisamment vibrante, cette appellation fort oubliée depuis un quart de siècle: “citoyennes et citoyens!”/La salle éclate en applaudissements./ L’homme qu’on accueille ainsi ne dira peut-être rien de plus intéressant que ce qu’ont dit les autres; qu’importe ? En lançant son ‘citoyens’, il a évoqué, sciemment ou non, qui sait? tout un monde de souvenirs et d’espérances. Chacun tressaille, frissonne ... L’effet est immense’ (Lefrançais 1913 [1902], 300). Translation author; adapted from Ross (2016 : 15–16). Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations are the author’s.

2 The preparation of this epilogue was financially supported by the European Research Council under grant agreement 788572 for the project *Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe* (ReAct)

fabric that would lead just two years later to the uprising of 1871 (2015, 15–16). She emphasises how the words performed “a forcible inscription of social difference” (Ross 2015, 16) by opening up a gap between subjects identifying with ‘ladies and gentlemen’ and subjects being interpellated as citizens (m/f). Pronounced at a time when they were no longer expected, the ‘new-old’ words ‘citoyennes et citoyens’ brought the possibility of social change into the room. Indeed, according to Ross, the egalitarian mode of address ensured that change was already happening: in challenging the bourgeois hegemony of ladies and gentlemen, Briosne’s speech reflects the performative power of language (Austin 1962) to change the world and not just describe it.

Although Ross notes in passing that this explosive mode of address resonated with earlier revolutions in France she does not dwell on the implications of this fact or on the capacity of these words to evoke “a whole world of memories and hopes,” as the chronicler Lefrançais put it. In a temporal short circuit, ‘citoyennes and citoyens’ created a visceral and palpable shock by bringing not only the emergent future into the present but also the past. As several studies have shown (Godineau 2014; 1988), the term ‘citoyen’ (m) had become an active ingredient of the revolutionary project of 1789–1793 and a key part of its “protest lexicon” (Van den Elzen 2024). This was symbolically marked by its occurrence in the title of the National Assembly’s “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” (August 1789). If ‘citoyen’ (m) was a step forward towards greater inclusivity, it was also a step back, or at least a missed opportunity, to the extent that it institutionalised a highly gendered and exclusively male notion of citizenship. This would be famously challenged two years later by Olympe de Gouges who formulated a proposal for a follow-up “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Woman-Citizen” (*Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, 1791). Although De Gouges’ proposal never made it into legislation, it helped bring the femininised term ‘citoyenne’ into circulation in everyday recognition of the aspirations of women to be seen as political subjects (Godineau 1988). After 1795, the word disappeared from everyday usage but, having once been coined, it remained archived as part of the lexicon and could therefore always be reactivated along with the revolutionary memories associated with it. Accordingly, what Ross called the “forcible inscription of social difference” at the meeting in 1868 was not just a matter of class, but also of the gender faultline within the very idea of citizenship.

As a speech act, the use of the phrase ‘citoyennes et citoyens’ initiated a change in the relations among those present at the same time as it connected that change with the possibilities that the revolution of 1789 had brought into

play before its derailment into the Terror and Empire. As Lefrançais's chronicle put it, the words reactivated "a whole world of memories and hopes" ("Tout un monde de souvenirs et d'espérances") that had been submerged in the interval. The memory activated was not that of historical events as such, but of the horizons opened up by those events. The result is the temporal Möbius strip characteristic of the "memory-activism nexus" (Rigney 2018) in which the present, the future, and past futures are deeply entangled, and in which the prospective and the retrospective modes of memory-making work together (see also Rigney 2025). The fact that these entanglements are effectuated through the medium of language makes this episode especially resonant for the present collection.

How do language, memory, and contentious politics interact? As the preceding essays have shown from multiple perspectives, languages are sites of both innovation and conservation. The lexicon – including the protest lexicon available to activists – provides speakers with an archive of both current words and older ones that can be brought back into circulation. But if language carries the memory of earlier usage, it is also a powerful resource for reinventing the world by giving old words a new meaning or by coining "new words for a new world" (Albrecht 2019). It is a powerful mediator between what already exists and what is still only imagined, which makes it a particularly valuable observation point from which to explore the role of memory in social transformations.

That world-making and word-making go hand in glove is strikingly exemplified by Lea Ypi's account of the transition from communism to a market economy in Albania. From one day to the next, she writes in her memoir *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (2021), an entire vocabulary disappeared and was replaced by a new one. Those who wanted to 'go with the times' had to change the words they used and hence forget the language they had formerly deployed:

We had been warned that the dictatorship of the proletariat was always under threat by the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. What we did not anticipate was that the first victim of that conflict, the clearest sign of victory, would be the disappearance of those very terms: *dictatorship, proletariat, bourgeoisie*. They were no longer part of our vocabulary. Before the withering away of the state, the language with which to articulate that aspiration itself withered away. [...] Only one word was left: *freedom*. It featured in every speech on television, in every slogan barked out in rage on the streets. (Ypi 2021, 137–38)

What Ypi describes here is linguistic hegemony; how different regimes operate by the willingness of citizens to speak a common language and to frame their expectations in light of particular keywords. She describes this shift of linguistic regime as a sudden occurrence in which a revolution creates a new vocabulary and makes the older one obsolete, hence cutting off connections to the recent past.

As Victor Klemperer (1966 [1947]) already showed in the 1940s, however, linguistic regime change is usually not so sudden. In his meticulous scrutiny of the language of the Third Reich, he compares it to the dispensing of arsenic which slowly, drop by drop, utterance by utterance, ended up poisoning the body politic. The essays in this collection too examine the link between language and world-making both in everyday usage and at revolutionary moments, and in this sense echo Klemperer and Ypi. Where they highlight the power of language to support regimes, however, the focus here is on challenges to linguistic hegemony and the role of keywords both in imagining more socially just pathways for society and in reconnecting with earlier transformative projects. As Marc Steinberg argues in *Fighting Words* (1999), “because of the polyvocality of language, hegemonic formations are always prey to resistance and appropriation” (236).

Echoing James Billington’s (1980) study of the “linguistic creativity” (7) of nineteenth-century revolutionaries, Tamar Katriel shows in this volume how activists in contemporary Israel continuously invent new words or apply old ones in unexpected ways in order to recalibrate their goals and the issues they want to address. A case in point is the term ‘anti-occupation’ which in the last decade has acquired a strong “contentious edge” (Katriel, this volume) and hence replaced the term ‘peace movement’ as a mobilising term in oppositional movements. Until they too become normalised, contentious words have the power to force people out of the familiarity of their linguistic habits and hence their ingrained ways of thinking and acting. Additionally, they help designate the speaker of those words as a contentious subject taking an oppositional stance. In the French case described above, the term ‘citizen’ (m/f) was marked as having a contentious edge and, in line with this, Lefrançais’s *Souvenirs d’un révolutionnaire* (1913 [1902]) not only reported on the 1868 incident but also used ‘citizen’ as its default term for referring to political subjects. In other words, its author acted out an oppositional position in his linguistic behaviour as well as in political action.

The history of social movements might accordingly be written in terms of their invention of new words or their re-signification of old ones to evoke hitherto unimaginable ways of being or acting. The term ‘sabotage,’ for example,

originally emerged in response to industrialisation and literally meant ‘throwing a clog into the works’: once the term had come into common usage it could also be applied to other forms of protest (Tarrow 2014, 56). As Sophie van den Elzen (2024) shows, social movements include “word workers” who labour to reframe issues by re-signifying familiar words and, in the process, breaking with the meanings with which they have been traditionally associated. She shows how the term ‘solidarity’ gained a new meaning in the 1960s in this way, which in turn helped in creating new alignments in the rearview mirror of activist memory.

A HIRAK Glossary: Terms from Algeria and Morocco (2019–2020) is an online dictionary of key terms and slogans in Arabic and local dialects that have been used in ongoing protests in Algeria and Morocco. The glossary aims to highlight the linguistic creativity at play in the protests, in the coining of new words like ‘Vendredire’ (meaning ‘speaking out on Fridays’) but also in the resignification of older ones like ‘Karama’ (meaning ‘dignity’). Sharing these codes – literally, speaking the same language – helps in creating solidarity and a common sense of purpose. As the editors of the glossary point out, quoting Michel Foucault, “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 1991 [1970], 52). It is too soon to say if the words that have come to populate the HIRAK glossary (HIRAK means ‘movement’) will become common currency or if they will be recalled in future mobilisations. But this much can already be said: the existence of the glossary helps in “sedimenting” (Della Porta 2020) the movement in a retrievable cultural form that may be activated at a later date.³ As an archive of activism, the glossary represents a form of future-oriented memory work (see also Rigney 2024): it provides the conditions for prolonging the protests into a possible future where the present day will be remembered by re-activating these captured words.

The present collection offers numerous historical examples in which words have indeed built bridges between one movement and another; even if, as in the case of ‘citoyenne et citoyens,’ considerable time has already elapsed between the original coinage and present usage. Because certain keywords have become coded markers of a particular movement and entered the linguistic archive as such, their revival at later points in time enables a new movement to remember the older one and hence also to pick up on its unfinished business. That aspirations cross over from one mobilisation to another with

3 I am grateful to Susan Slyomovics for drawing my attention to the HIRAK glossary.

the help of words is well illustrated in the present collection by the terms ‘pueblo’ and ‘compañero/compañera,’ key terms in the Allende Government in Chile in 1973. Having become linguistic markers of support for the Allende government and its social project, they were re-activated in the 2019 Chilean uprising and the Chilean feminist movement respectively (see the chapters by Hannah Grimmer and Nicolás Villarroel and Vic Riveros). In such cases, words have operated as carriers of the memory of the regime and of its hopes long after its defeat. Re-activated at a later point in time, ‘pueblo’ and ‘compañero/compañera’ became a way of reconnecting with the regime’s aspirations, and hence regained their contentious edge. While these processes can occur organically, the building of lexical bridges between movements can also be actively promoted. As the HIRAK glossary already showed, sedimenting language use in the form of a dictionary is one way of ensuring that terms have a better chance of outlasting the particular occasions on which they are invented.

The HIRAK glossary is unique in its geographical and linguistic focus but is arguably also part of a trend within recent social movements. A compilation of texts and images related to the Nuit Debout movement in France in 2016, for example, includes a glossary of some 30 key terms (“Les mots de Nuit Debout”; Ngo and Truong 2016, 229–40). These relate to the organisation of the occupation of the Place de la République in Paris and to its guiding principles: ‘general assembly,’ ‘nuitdeboutistes,’ ‘Camille’ (the moniker to be used by protesters wanting to keep their anonymity), ‘free speech,’ and ‘horizontality,’ among others. The list of ‘Nuit Debout words’ also includes the proper names of earlier movements that have now become part of the vocabulary of the new movement and form inspirational points of reference: Occupy (referencing events in Wall Street in 2011), the Indignados (referencing Spain’s 15-M movement of 2011), and the ‘Zone-à-défendre’ or ZAD (exemplified by the long-term occupation of Notre Dame des Landes that had been going on since the early 2000s). Defined as the “political occupation of a space threatened by developers” (Ngo and Truong 2016, 240), the term ‘ZAD’ shows how an earlier mobilisation has turned into a retrievable word with a mnemonic charge and contentious edge. Sedimenting the words specific to Nuit Debout and the traditions in which it places itself is again a form of future-oriented memory work.

The same can be said of the glossary (“Glossar”) included in the collectively written portrait of the aims and achievements of the German climate activist movement Ende Gelände (2022, 194–200). This German-language book with the provocative English title *We Shut Shit Down* (2022) is overtly aimed at catching something of the movement’s momentum, at sedimenting its energies and vision with a view to transferring these to future activists: “With this book written about and by Ende Gelände we wanted to capture some of the

movement's history" ("Mit diesem Buch von und über Ende Gelände wollen wir ein Stück Bewegungsgeschichte festhalten," 12). The accompanying glossary covers movement-specific terms such as the '5-finger-tactic' (referring to a tactic for distributing demonstrators across a territory) and 'Klima Alman' (referring to climate activists with a middle-class background) as well as terms related specifically to the movement's climate focus and its political principles: ecocide, fracking, and prefigurative politics, among others. Like that of *Nuit Debout*, the glossary also includes the monikers of earlier movements (*Zapatistas*, *Occupy*) whose memory inspires the present. More unexpectedly, it also references a rack of terms relating to antiracism and the movement for trans rights (of the 53 terms in the glossary, almost half are gender-, racism-, or colonialism-related, including the English words 'racial empathy gap' and 'racial profiling'). These inclusions in a handbook on climate activism reflect the aspiration of *Ende Gelände* to be intersectional as well as the growing link between environmental and social justice in the movement itself. However, their salience in the glossary also suggests that the collective composition of the list of keywords had itself become a site of struggle for defining the movement's priorities and future direction as well as its genealogy in earlier movements.

That mediation is crucial to the production of collective memory has long been recognised. An already substantial body of literature has revealed the importance of media technologies and cultural forms in shaping and transmitting the stories we tell about that past. What this collection reveals for the first time is the importance of language as such in shaping our understanding of the past, in carrying the past into the present and, above all, in helping to define transformative agendas in the present while also looping back to earlier mobilisations. Together the essays serve as a reminder of just how complex a technology language is, operating as it does through syntax, conventions of use, discursive genres as well as different lexicons. If I have concentrated on the lexicon here it is to offer a reminder that single words, and not just big discursive formations, do for societies what 'good' bacteria do for the body: they are small, active, sometimes invisible, but very powerful. Where most discussions of cultural mediation in memory studies have highlighted the schemata through which we make sense of events, we should not forget that small words like 'citizen' (m/f), 'vendredire,' 'pueblo' and so on persist across time and do vital work in both sustaining and reinventing the world.

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How does language shape the memory of activism? And how do memories, of hope or of repression, inflect the language used by social movements in the present day?

This edited volume, featuring international scholars across literary and cultural studies, anthropology, legal studies, and linguistics, shows how memories of activism live in the medium of language. It contends that working with, and working on, the historical resonance of words and linguistic commonplaces is a central feature of political contention.

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