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Louise Michel's London years

A political reassessment (1890–1905)

Constance Bantman

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example of the specificities of exilic politics as a distinct repertoire, which must be understood and analysed as such, with close attention to transnational ramifications (either in person or through print culture), the role of formal and informal networking activities, and the centrality of exile itself as a focus for reflection and activism.

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to a lack of funds but its coherence with Michel's overall political conceptions, in the fast-changing diplomatic context of the late nineteenth century, should not be forgotten.

Conclusion

This article has sought to correct the distorted perspective resulting from masculinist interpretations of Michel's militancy and the limitations of methodological nationalism. The dominant apolitical, 'irrational' narrative of Michel's exile is heavily gendered insofar as it is fraught with masculinist stereotypes which hide the wide scope, consistency and considerable effectiveness of Michel's activism, discounting her remarkable militant record in terms of her propaganda dissemination, fundraising, and her role in organising the exile community. This masculinist bias results in a double distortion: it grossly understates her concrete militant achievements, even when they compared very favourably with those of the most prominent male anarchists of the period (for instance with respect to her public speaking, writing, fundraising, and campaigning activities), and glosses over the more feminine forms of her political involvement (networking, educationalism, community organisation). This double bias has resulted in a very limited understanding of Michel's anarchist activism, which centres on her iconic status. A close examination of Michel's exilic activism has evidenced the limitations of this near-exclusive focus on her persona as a symbol, a 'plebeian legend'⁹⁹ and a charismatic figure—however fruitful and relevant these approaches are when considered within a broader analytical framework. Second, Michel's example also provides yet another instance of the significant historiographical reassessments induced by the shift to a transnational perspective, as well as a revealing

⁹⁹ 'LM' par Séverine, *Gil Blas*, 26 March 1894.

the space dedicated to the topics of political prisoners, anarchist refugees and police provocation in the last volume of her memoirs.

Her involvement in the politics of exile inspired in Michel a long-term hope to open an *'asile des proscrits'*—a shelter for destitute exiles. She first announced this project during a visit to France in 1895, in a statement which connected her admiration for British liberal values with her plan to organise material support for the exiles:

I have formed a beautiful project. My dream is to set up in London a large refuge house offering shelter to all exiles: the Maison des Proscrits. It is to London that all those forsaken and exiled by their homelands run for shelter. They find freedom there—but most of them, alas, cannot enjoy it, having nothing to eat. Oh, so many unsuspected miseries I have seen [...] Ha, my Maison des Proscrits!⁹⁶

Michel's dream did not materialise but she did follow up on her initial plan, launching several calls for donations,⁹⁷ organising a *'Ligue'* to support the project (she was its secretary), and renewing her calls in various French publications. One of these calls was especially vigorous, as it advertised that a piece of land was available for immediate purchase and another for rent. The project was developed along the lines of the anarchist colonies and cooperatives elsewhere: 'It would be possible to live there immediately (especially if there are many colons) since they would build greenhouses and would practice intensive agriculture.'⁹⁸ The project was eventually abandoned due

⁹⁶ 'Le retour de Louise Michel', *Libre Parole*, 14 November 1895,.

⁹⁷ Thomas, *Louise Michel*, p. 402.

⁹⁸ 'Appel pour un asile de proscrits', *Le Libéraire*, 27 March 1897, Michel, *Histoire de ma vie*, pp. 159–160.

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a political reassessment of the long period of time spent in London by the French Communist-turned-anarchist Louise Michel (1890–1905). It emphasises the breadth of her militant repertoire as well as her very concrete engagement in specific political projects, and highlights the coherence of her political outlook and activities. This perspective challenges predominantly masculinist portrayals of Michel, which focus heavily on sentiment as an explanation for her political activism, and downplay her overall agency as a militant. It also highlights the limitations of methodological nationalism in analysing Michel's activities in exile. Four key aspects are examined: Michel's print and open-air propaganda; her network-building activities; her contribution to libertarian pedagogies through the 'International socialist school' which she set up in Fitzrovia in the early 1890s; and her campaigning activities for the defence of the right of asylum and support for political refugees, at a time when liberal understandings of asylum were being questioned.

In 1890, the iconic French communist turned anarchist Louise Michel moved to London, where she remained almost uninterruptedly until her death in Marseilles, France, in January 1905. She had left France in dramatic circumstances, having narrowly avoided forced detention in a psychiatric asylum in June 1890 after being diagnosed with suspected early-onset senile dementia,¹ and claimed to be departing in order to escape France's omnipresent police surveillance. In

¹ Edith Thomas (2009) *Louise Michel* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), trans. Penelope Williams, pp. 304–310; Archives Nationales (French National Archives, henceforth AN) F712505, letters from 3 June 1890, Cabinet du préfet de l'Isère; from the sous-préfet's office to the préfet; Hospices de Vi- enne, 3 June 1890, Doctor's letter; Sophie Kerignard (2004) *Les femmes, les*

London, she lived first in Soho and Fitzrovia's 'Petite France', the traditional quarter of French political refugees spreading to the north and south of Oxford Street, before moving to East Dulwich (1893–1895: 15 Ardsley Terrace, Placquett Rd), then Sydenham (1902: 8 Albion Villas Road), and eventually Streatham (1903: Dahomey Road),² gradually settling into a relatively quiet and very studious life, often plagued by poverty but busy with multifaceted activism. Michel's life echoes that of several other high-profile, predominantly male anarchists, who have been described as 'rooted cosmopolitans' or itinerant militants,³ whose personal and political journeys were characterised by a great deal of international travel, sociability and militancy, financial precariousness and the constant threat of police surveillance, at a time of unprecedented transnational and exilic anarchist activism, when London was one of the main destinations for anarchist refugees from all over Europe.⁴ Michel's very presence in London was a strong political statement, which inscribed her in a tradition of republican and socialist exile in England, and made her a new incarnation of a now-familiar figure in French politics: the banished or exiled intellectual and militant. This echoed her own earlier exile in New Caledonia after the Commune (1872–1880), and recalled the trajectories

mal entendues du discours libertaire? De la fin du dix-neuvième siècle à la Grande guerre (PhD thesis, Université Paris VIII, France). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

² Thomas, *Louise Michel*.

³ Carl Levy (2010) *The Rooted Cosmopolitan: Errico Malatesta, syndicalism, transnationalism and the international labour movement*, in Dave Berry & Constance Bantman (Eds) *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour & Syndicalism: the individual, the national and the transnational* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar), pp. 61–79.

⁴ On the French and Italian anarchist groups in London, see Constance Bantman (2013) *The French Anarchists in London, 1880–1914: exile and transnationalism in the first globalisation* (Liverpool: LUP); Pietro Di Paola (2013) *The Knights Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian anarchist diaspora (1880–1917)* (Liverpool: LUP).

Indeed, the value that Michel placed on Britain's right of asylum must be related to her numerous declarations in praise of Britain's liberal values which contrasted sharply with her rejection of French surveillance, the initial cause of her exile:

[Michel] started by talking about the freedom people have in England to gather as they please. She pointed out that in some meetings, when there is considerable attendance, people are never afraid of running into trouble with the police--on the contrary, they protect meetings.⁹³

Such celebrations of Britain's liberal atmosphere and asylum policy, notably in contrast with France's repressive stance towards political radicals and refugees, were indeed a recurring theme in her writings and speeches:

[in England] the destitute can assemble and say openly what they think; or at least they can tell one another about their miseries unreservedly.⁹⁴

She spoke at length about the Commune, and declared that the working classes find in England, under a monarchist regime, far more freedom than in Republican France.⁹⁵

In the defence of British liberal values and her support for victims of political oppression and repression, Michel's position was clear, consistent and sustained. She also used her reputation, time and contacts to support campaigns to further this cause. Just how attached to this cause she was can be seen in

⁹³ Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (henceforth APP) BA 1497, unsigned report dated 12 September 1897, 'Réunion publique organisée par les libertaires au profit des martyrs de Montjuich'.

⁹⁴ APP BA 1184, 17 June 1896, report by the Commissaire de police on a conference by Michel.

⁹⁵ AN F7 12504, 12 May 1897, report from commissariat de Toulouse.

demonstrations and journalistic initiatives to protest against ‘Spanish events’, in London and internationally.⁸⁸ She travelled from Paris to Belgium with her companion Charlotte Vauvelle and the French anarchist François Broussouloux in order to give a lecture in aid of the Barcelona Anarchists, but they were arrested in Brussels. As they were being evacuated by the police, a crowd surrounded them and subsequently tried to make their way into the Spanish Embassy to protest against the arrest—an incident which was reported internationally.⁸⁹

In 1903, Michel was secretary of a Plenary Amnesty Group for Spanish prisoners,⁹⁰ and spoke at international rallies in London alongside British and international anarchists as well as former Montjuich detainees.⁹¹ Michel devoted a chapter of her 1904 memoirs to these events, recalling the arrival of the refugees at Euston station, and the gatherings organised in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square in support of the refugees and in protest against Spanish violence, including in Cuba. This brief chapter, dedicated to Spanish, Russian and universal victims of political oppression and setting out in lyrical tones the coming of ‘deliverance’, was also an opportunity for Michel to salute ‘this beautiful feeling which will forever honour England—hospitality’.⁹²

⁸⁸ ‘Spanish Atrocities: demonstration in Trafalgar Square’, *London Daily News*, 25 April 1898, p. 8; *Le Libéraire*, 29 January 1897, advertising *L’Incorruptible*, a single-issue publication about Spain, with contributions from Michel alongside other very prominent (and overwhelmingly male) anarchists such as Elisée Reclus, Jean Grave, Malato, Bernard Lazare, Lorenzo Portet, Tarrida del Marmol, etc.

⁸⁹ ‘Riots in the Streets of Brussels’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 17 September 1897, p. 4.

⁹⁰ *Freedom*, May 1899.

⁹¹ ‘La Mano Negra’, *Temps Nouveaux*, 14 February 1903, p. 4; *Temps Nouveaux*, 13 June 1903, p. 4.

⁹² Michel, ‘Les Espagnols à Londres’, in Gauthier (Ed.), *Histoire de ma vie*, pp. 146–147.

of earlier French exiles in Britain, such as Auguste Blanqui, Victor Hugo and Jules Vallès.⁵ Exile thus repositioned Michel as an activist, altering but not diminishing her importance in French and international radical politics, possibly heightening it through the gravitas of exile. The fervour and interest which she continued to elicit are attested by occasional visits and conference tours in France between 1890 and 1905, which routinely attracted hundreds or thousands of listeners or passers-by, and her funeral, which brought a 50,000-strong procession to the streets of Paris.⁶ Equally telling are the countless articles devoted to her in both the French and the British press, reporting on her public appearances, speeches and, more prosaically, on her quiet suburban life in London.

It is therefore surprising that Michel’s London years have largely been examined in passing, despite contributions by her numerous biographers,⁷ as well as historians of London, anarchism and radicalism in and outside academia.⁸ In addition to the ample autobiographical material provided by

⁵ Sylvie Aprile (2010) *Le Siècle des exilés: Bannis et proscrits de 1789 à la Commune* (Paris: CNRS Editions).

⁶ Casey Harrison (2007) The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Shifting of the Revolutionary Tradition, *History & Memory*, 19(2), pp. 5–42.

⁷ Thomas, *Louise Michel*; Anne Sizaire (1995) *Louise Michel, L’absolu de la générosité* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer); Paule Lejeune (2002) *Louise Michel L’indomptable* (Paris: L’Harmattan); Gerald Dittmar (2004) *Louise Michel (1830–1905)* (Paris: Editions Dittmar); Louise Michel (2015) *La Chasse aux Loups*, Claude Rétat (Ed.) (Paris: Classiques Garnier). For detailed studies on Michel within a broader framework, see also Kathleen Hart (2004) *Revolution and Women’s Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amsterdam, NY: Faux Titre) and Kerignard, ‘Les femmes’.

⁸ Lydia Syson, ‘In the Footsteps of the Communards’: ‘The Red Virgin’, <http://www.lydiasyson.com/tag/louise-michel/>; <http://the-history-girls.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/anarchy-in-fitzrovia-by-lydia-syson.html> accessed 10 August 2016; Alex Butterworth (2010) *The World that Never Was: a true story of dreamers, schemers, anarchists and secret agents* (London: The Bodley Head); Bantman, *French Anarchists in London*.

Michel herself,⁹ the most extensive depiction of her activities in London has been provided by her most lauded biographer, Edith Thomas, who has described Michel's life and political involvements in considerable detail, albeit primarily from a French perspective.¹⁰ Overall, and in contrast to Michel's extensively studied period of deportation in New Caledonia,¹¹ the significance of this new exile in her personal and political itinerary, as well as its broader political relevance, remains largely unheeded.

This oversight may be attributed to a combination of factors, which point to erroneous assumptions regarding Michel's political trajectory, exile politics and women's radical activism, especially in a transnational context. The first factor is the epoch-defining importance of the Paris Commune in historiography, in contrast to which Michel's activities following her return from New Caledonia tend to be regarded as an epilogue without much political substance. This imbalance is also characteristic of the frequent obliteration of Michel's transition to anarchism as part of a sanitised republican narrative in which Michel is one of the most distinctive figures.¹² The second factor pertains to the enduring bias of methodological nationalism, which often

⁹ Louise Michel (1886) *Mémoires de Louise Michel, écrits par elle-même* (Paris: F. Roy, libraire-éditeur). Xavière Gauthier (Ed.) (1999) *Je vous écris de ma nuit: correspondance générale de Louise Michel, 1850–1904* (Editions de Paris); Louise Michel (2000), *Histoire de ma vie*, Xavière Gauthier (Ed.) (Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon).

¹⁰ Thomas, *Louise Michel*.

¹¹ This is covered in an abundant literature on deportation and the Commune (see for instance Joel Dauphiné (2006) *La Déportation de Louise Michel: vérité et légendes* (Paris: Les Indes savantes), as well as in recent non-academic production, such as Solveig Anspach's 2010 film, *Louise Michel la rebelle* and Mary M. Talbot & Bryan Talbot's 2016 graphic novel *The Red Virgin and the Vision of Utopia* (London: Jonathan Cape).

¹² J. Didier Giraud, Louise Michel, d'hier à aujourd'hui, in Francis McCollum Feeley (Ed.) *Le patriarcat et les institutions américaines. Études comparées* (Chambéry: Éditions de l'université de Savoie), p. 5.

extradition marked a first step towards the comprehensive revision of Britain's asylum policy. Yet Michel was an important voice in in this attempt to prevent era-defining change of approach to immigration and asylum and one that articulated a clear anarchist vision.

Michel's interest in asylum did not vanish after 1892. She remained one of the most vocal and consistent defenders of a brand of Anglophilia based on the appreciation of liberal values and the rights enjoyed by political minorities in Britain. This was a seemingly paradoxical position for an anarchist but it was fairly widespread among the London French exiles and points to a degree of ideological convergence between anarchism and liberalism.⁸⁵ Just a few years after the François campaign, she became an active supporter of Spanish refugees, libertarians exposed to heavy repression, at a time when protests against political repression in Spain emerged as a cross-political and transnational cause for left-leaning groups.⁸⁶ While the activities of the anarchist-led Spanish Atrocities Committee engaged in this defence are documented as far back as 1893, it became more active and prominent in 1897–1898 after the arrival of the refugees and Michel was one many anarchists taking part in the Committee's campaigns. She is reported to have attended and spoken at mass meetings in Trafalgar Square to protest against cruelty to prisoners in Spain attended by Spanish refugees.⁸⁷ In 1897–1898, mobilisation focused on torture at the military fortress of Montjuich in Barcelona and violence in Cuba, and Michel took part in

⁸⁵ François Bédarida (1976) Sur l'anarchisme en Angleterre, in *Mélanges d'histoire sociale offerts à Jean Maitron* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières), pp. 11–25.

⁸⁶ Daniel Laqua (2014) Freethinkers, Anarchists and Francisco Ferrer: The Making of a Transnational Solidarity Campaign, *European Review of History* 21(4), pp. 467–484.

⁸⁷ The *South Wales Daily News*, 23 August 1897, noted Michel's presence; see also 'The Spanish Anarchists', *Suffolk and Essex Free Press*, 4 August 1897, p. 3; 'Angleterre', *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 13 February 1897, p. 3.

had been granted by Bow Street Magistrates Court caused great concern in London's anarchist circles, leading to renewed mobilisation. A Committee for the Defence of the Right of Asylum was formed to raise money and appeal against the extradition order.⁸² Michel was among its members, alongside *The Torch's* Rossettis, Kropotkin, and the British anarchist Agnes Henry; once more, Michel acted as a fundraiser for the anarchist cause.⁸³ François's own disreputable character, as well as ideological divisions over the contentious issue of providing asylum for foreign terrorists meant that among London's anarchist and revolutionary circles, some militants were very dismissive of the mobilisation and of Michel's efforts in particular. For example, Olive Garnett, who was close to the Rossettis, noted a conversation with the Russian revolutionary Sergei Stepniak:

Talking of Louise Michel, he said she was a fine character, an ideal woman, but crazy, all wrong. He narrated some noble things she had done, and said that hers was a sad proof of the capacity for wrong going for right, of man.⁸⁴

In light of Michel's consistent and considerable support for the defence of asylum, Stepniak depoliticised Michel's activism, dismissing her actual views and agency in favour of a simplistic and emotional interpretation. The campaign was unsuccessful: François's appeal was dismissed in December 1892 and his

other Russian revolutionaries in London] had no sympathy with François and were disgusted with the Anarchists' appeal ... They teased me about being an Anarchist.'

⁸² 'L'Affaire Francis', *Le Gaulois*, 28 October 1892, p. 2; 'Petites nouvelles de l'extérieur', *Le Gaulois*, 28 November 1892, p. 2; 'L'extradition de François', *La Lanterne*, 27 November 1892, p. 2; 'Francis extradé', *Le Journal*, 3 December 1892, p. 1.

⁸³ Louise Michel Papers, IISH, item 11, letter from C. René (1892?).

⁸⁴ Johnson, *Tea and Anarchy*, p. 136.

means that exile continues to be portrayed as a parenthesis in political activism, and transnational militancy is easily downplayed or overlooked. Nonetheless, this assumption is increasingly irrelevant for political and labour history in general, and most certainly for anarchist studies, where the transnational turn has had a deep revisionist impact in the last decade, highlighting a great wealth of multifaceted cross-border activism on a variety of scales, as part of a wider reassessment of exile as a site of intense political activism in the long nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.¹³ However, while the importance of London as a hub of transnational activism has been repeatedly emphasised in this collective work, the reassessment of Michel's specific achievements in this perspective is long overdue.

A third, key factor that helps to explain the lack of scholarly attention to Michel's exile years relates to her persona and the masculinist historiographic treatment it has received, which is characterised by a recurring emphasis on emotions and sentimentality as the main interpretative framework, precluding a fair assessment of her actual militant endeavours.¹⁴ The flaws of such a limited perspective are strikingly illustrated

¹³ Benedict Anderson (2008) *Under Three Flags: anarchism and the anti-colonial imagination* (London: Verso); Steven Hirsch & Lucian Van Der Walt (Eds) (2010) *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: the praxis of national liberation, internationalism and social revolution* (Leiden: Brill); Raymond Craib & Barry Maxwell (Eds) (2015) *No Gods No Masters No Peripheries: global anarchisms* (Oakland: PM Press); Berry & Bantman, *New Perspectives*; Di Paola, *The Knights Errant of Anarchy*; Geoffroy De Laforcade & Kirwin R. Shaffer (Eds) (2015) *In Defiance of Boundaries: anarchism in Latin American* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press); Constance Bantman & Bert Altena (Eds) (2015) *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: scales of analysis in anarchist and syndicalist studies* (London: Routledge).

¹⁴ Based on the definitions of masculinism proposed by Sandra Stanley Holton (2011) *Challenging Masculinism: personal history and microhistory in feminist studies of the women's suffrage movement*, *Women's History Review*, 20(5), pp. 829–841; Gay Gullickson (2014), 'Militant Women: representa-

by her contemporary Georges Clemenceau's summary of her militancy: 'Where is Louise Michel going? I have no clue; and neither does she, most likely. She goes instinctively to all that laments, suffers, and misery.'¹⁵ This supposedly laudatory statement negates intentionality and purpose, emphasising instead 'instinct' and miserabilism as interpretative frameworks for Michel and her actions. Countless contemporary and retrospective depictions of Michel similarly deploy derogatory or eulogising stereotypes, emphasising her saintliness, emotionality, passion, near-religious fervour and casting her as a madwoman or a mother-figure, depending on the author's political stance.¹⁶ Fellow anarchist and touring companion Ernest Girault, for instance, observed:

She is dead, and nothing remains of her philosophy—just like nothing will remain of the apostles of sheer goodness, mere sentimentalism. At the historical moment, their influence only counts as a spurt of sympathies.¹⁷

Whilst highlighting Michel's iconic status and revolutionary fervour, accounts such as Girault's focus on the symbolic dimensions of her political militancy, trivialising or paying little attention to more practical forms of engagement and the actual political stances which Michel took over time, and denying her any form of agency and effectiveness. This replicates an assumption of irrationality, deviancy and sentiment, which is

tions of Charlotte Corday, Louise Michel and Emmeline Pankhurst', *Women's History Review*, 23(6), pp. 837–852.

¹⁵ George Clemenceau, 'Louise Michel', *Justice*, 19 December 1893.

¹⁶ Amanda Lancaster (2015) *Alcoholics, Lesbians, and Radicals: depicting deviancy in fin-de-siècle France and the creation of a deviant femininity* (MA diss., Texas Tech University).

¹⁷ Ernest Girault (1906) *La Bonne Louise. Psychologie de Louise Michel: sa physionomie, son caractère, son tempérament, sa mentalité, les dernières années de sa vie*, Paris (Paris), pp. 201–202.

at institutional level; that is, the high politics and legalities of exile.⁷⁸ She was active in several campaigns for the maintenance of the right of asylum in Britain and the protection of political refugees in the pivotal period of the early 1890s, when Britain was in effect the last European country granting asylum to international anarchists fleeing repression. However, public anxieties fanned by fears of racial, cultural and economic decline meant that this position was increasingly called into question. Unsurprisingly, several anarchist *causes célèbres* involving foreign exiles acted as catalysts in these debates.⁷⁹

At the end of 1892, the extradition of the anarchist Jean-Pierre François was requested by French authorities in connection with Paris's Café Véry explosion in April that year. This represented a drastic departure from the tradition of liberal asylum hitherto prevalent in Victorian Britain. Since the 1876 French Extradition Treaty stipulated that political offenders could not be extradited, the French authorities' request could only be granted if the *political* nature of François's suspected crime was denied and he was no longer considered a political refugee entitled to asylum.⁸⁰ London's British and international anarchists mobilised for François's impending court case, fearing that it would set a precedent for other future extraditions. François's fate held high stakes, although François himself attracted little sympathy outside small anarchist circles.⁸¹ In October 1892, the news that the extradition

⁷⁸ Michel, *Histoire de ma vie*, p. 136.

⁷⁹ Bantman, *French Anarchists*, pp. 131–156.

⁸⁰ *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 'Foreigners and the Right of Asylum', p. 4.

⁸¹ Barry C. Johnson (Ed.) (1989) *Tea and Anarchy! The Bloomsbury diary of Olive Garnett 1890–1893* (London: Bartlett's Press), p. 138: Olive Rossetti (of *The Torch*) reports her discussion on the topic with the London-based Russian revolutionary Felix Volkhovsky: 'I asked him about François, he said that the question for him was one of extradition. Let F. be hanged by all means in France if he committed a crime there, that was the affair of the French government, but we ought to fight extradition, it was immorality between governments; Johnson, *Tea and Anarchy*, p. 135: 'They [Sergei Stepniak and

aimed to ‘develop among children the principles of humanity and justice essential in the twentieth century’.⁷⁶ French, English, German, Music, Drawing, Sewing, and Etching were among the subjects taught. The influence of the French libertarian educationist Paul Robin can be seen in the notion of ‘integral education’, both physical and intellectual. Technical teaching was included, as well as adult classes, especially English lessons for foreigners arriving in London. Michel taught the piano. The school, a reflection of her longstanding interest in education, was anchored in a long tradition of libertarian pedagogy that gained much ground in following years. It testifies to the many forms of propaganda in exile and the importance of anarchist cultural activities. The foundation of this institution must also be regarded as part of Michel’s continued endeavours to organise and support the community of London exiles, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Lastly, it signified the creation of a free radical and prefigurative space, which in turn has been identified as a practice that has proved especially congenial for feminists within the anarchist movement.⁷⁷ On all three counts, this short-lived but remarkable project must be salvaged from narratives of irrationality or mere eccentricity, and reclaimed as a significant—albeit short-lived—political and cultural experiment.

‘The one city of refuge forever open’: Michel, refugees and asylum

One final aspect of Michel’s militancy which has been almost completely overlooked by historians is her multifaceted involvement with the politics of asylum, both at grassroots and

⁷⁶ Advertisement for the ‘Ecole Socialiste’, *La Tribune Libre*, 15 November 1890, n.pag.

⁷⁷ Jeppensen & Nazar, ‘Genders and Sexualities in Anarchist Movements’.

typical of masculinist narratives of women’s activism, and results in marginalising women’s contributions in larger political narratives.¹⁸ In Michel’s case, her gender and fame combined to expose her to intense levels of scrutiny and, at times, criticism, especially within anarchist ranks.

In contrast to these approaches, this article proposes a political reassessment of Michel’s London years, which emphasises the breadth of her militant repertoire as well as her very concrete engagement in specific political projects, and conveys the coherence of her political outlook and activities. It examines the multifaceted political relevance of these exile years within a wider context of anarchist transnationalism, London-based radicalism and Anglo-French relations. In doing so, it highlights Michel’s engagement with highly visible forms of political activities, which tend to be stereotypically regarded as masculine—public speaking; journalism; political congress attendance; government lobbying—and also with feminine forms of anarchist militancy, in particular informal networking, involvement in radical public spaces and direct action.¹⁹ This revisionist approach is based on a re-reading of familiar sources²⁰ rather than the inclusion of new primary material; indeed, while feminist historians challenging masculinist accounts have insisted on the benefits

¹⁸ June Purvis (2013) Gendering the Historiography of the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Britain: some reflections, *Women’s History Review*, 22(4), pp. 576–590, p. 580; Holton, ‘Challenging Masculinism’.

¹⁹ Sandra Jeppesen & Holly Nazar (2014) Genders and Sexualities in Anarchist Movements, in Ruth Kinna (Ed.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Anarchism* (London: Bloomsbury), pp. 162–191.

²⁰ See in particular her impressive correspondence, held at Amsterdam’s IISH (partly published and edited by Gauthier (Ed.) *Je vous écris de ma nuit*, as well as, earlier than the period under consideration here, Michel (1886) *Mémoires de Louise Michel*.)

of using personal documents,²¹ the stereotypical depiction of Michel as irrational and ineffective is rectified through the application of relevant theoretical frameworks and analytical perspectives, primarily drawn from studies of transnational anarchist militancy and anarchist women's activism. A non-exhaustive list of recurring themes in these approaches includes the multifaceted role of individual mediators, the personal networks into which they assemble, ideological exchanges through the press or private correspondence, and an engagement with international militant ventures.²² Close attention to these aspects evidences the remarkable scope, consistency and effectiveness of Michel's activism while in London. The following focuses in particular on these aspects of Michel's work: her print propaganda; her transnational and transpolitical network-building activities; her contribution to libertarian pedagogies through the 'International anarchist school' which she set up in the Fitzroy Square area in the early 1890s; and her campaigning activities for the defence of political refugees, at a time when liberal understandings of asylum were being called into question.

Print-based activism and open-air propaganda

Michel was a central figure in London's international anarchist circles, who deployed a wide repertoire of activism towards a number of causes with clear transnational impact and a unique rallying power. She focused particularly on oral and written propaganda activities, including literary,

²¹ Purvis, 'Gendering the Historiography'; June Purvis (1992) Using Primary Sources When Researching Women's History from a Feminist Perspective, *Women's History Review*, 1(2), pp. 273–306, p. 290.

²² For a more in-depth presentation of these approaches and further references, see Bantman, *French Anarchists in London*, p. 9.

and internationalist ideals and, like many contemporary libertarian endeavours, pioneering in terms of pedagogy. It was of course free (except for language tuition, which required a small fee) and relied on donations.⁷⁰ As Michel recalled soon after the failure of the project:

by taking on all these little French, English, German children, and teaching them languages, I wanted to enable them to know, and later understand one another, so that eventually, through the communion of ideas, nations might eventually hate one another less and learn to love one another.⁷¹

The historian Martyn Everett adds other nationalities to the list above: most of the children (an estimated total of forty at the start of the school)⁷² were sons and daughters of anarchists, who were in London for a short period only (Russians, Poles, Germans, French, Italians, Spaniards).⁷³ The teaching was based on Bakunin's educational principles, with an emphasis on scientific and rational methods, personal dignity, and individual independence, as well as clear references to anarchism. One visitor, for instance, recalled a history lesson illustrated by images of the hanged Chicago martyrs and the Communards being shot.⁷⁴ Corporal punishment was not used to sanction disruptive pupils, who were expelled or moved to a lower class instead. This clearly defies the stereotypical assumption of anarchist lack of discipline.⁷⁵ Above all, the school

⁷⁰ 'Louise Michel and her New School', *Derby Telegraph*, 14 September 1891, p. 2.

⁷¹ 'Louise Michel', *L'Eclair*, 11 November 1893.

⁷² 'Louise Michel and her New School', *Pall Mall Gazette*.

⁷³ Correspondence with Martyn Everett: <http://void.nothingness.org/archives/ra/display/2312/index.php> accessed 22 September 2016.

⁷⁴ McMillan, *The Life of Rachel McMillan*, p. 60.

⁷⁵ 'Louise Michel and her New School', *Derby Telegraph*.

The few existing accounts tend to emphasise its quirkiness or, at worst, describe it as another instance of anarchist disorganisation and overall ineffectiveness:

The school was, of course, a failure ... Ordinary notions of school discipline received scant attention. The fundamental anarchist principle of individual liberty for all and everyone here was carried out in its fullness.⁶⁷

Undeniably, the experiment came to a sorry end in 1892, when explosives and bomb-making material were found in the building's basement during a police raid, having most likely been placed there by the infiltrated spy and provocateur Auguste Coulon, who had helped to set up the school and lived on the premises.⁶⁸ This epilogue has led contemporaries and subsequently scholars to a focus on bombs, sensationalism and terrorist-themed narratives and as a result the school has not really been examined as part of a long tradition of anarchist pedagogical endeavours underpinned by significant transnational exchanges. And yet, the school's staff and board reflected this pedagogical and transnational perspective, with the participation of education pioneer Margaret McMillan, and Michel's own training as a school teacher as well as clear interest in pedagogy. The very international School board comprised distinguished socialist figures, such as Kropotkin, Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, and William Morris, along with a dozen other comrades; the prospectus advertising the School was designed by Walter Crane.⁶⁹

The School was a clear anarchist endeavour in terms of aims, ideals, and organisation. It was pervaded with egalitarian

⁶⁷ See for instance W. C. Hart (1906) *Confessions of an Anarchist* (London: E. Grant Richards), pp. 120–121.

⁶⁸ Bantman, *French Anarchists in London*, pp. 90–91.

⁶⁹ 'Louise Michel and Her New School. An Interview', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 September 1891, pp. 1–2.

historical and philosophical writings, journalism, public speaking and attendance at political gatherings in Britain and internationally. Through these various channels, Michel developed key themes, such as the inevitability of the revolution; articulated fiercely critical positions on social injustice, the nation and nationalism; and conveyed her specific anarchist outlook, which combined an acceptance of political violence with compassion and a universalist perspective, often expressed through hyperbole and striking imagery. The themes discussed in her interventions ranged from contemporary politics to post-revolutionary prophecies, and her approach blurred boundaries between art and life, high and low culture, cultural and political discourse, artistic and artisanal work, and high art and the mundane.²³ This breadth of vision and her original voice were already encapsulated in her statement during the 1883 Invalides trial:

I recognize no borders, saying that all humanity has the right to the heritage of humanity. That inheritance will not belong to us, because we are accustomed to living in slavery. It will belong to those persons in the future who will have liberty and who will know how to enjoy it.²⁴

Out of both financial need and her customary creativity, Michel remained a very prolific literary and political writer in London, even overseeing the translation of some of her earlier works. Her history of the 1871 Commune, *La Commune. Histoire et Souvenirs*, published in France in 1898 after being

²³ Hart, *Revolution and Women's Autobiography*.

²⁴ Nic Maclellan (Ed.) (2004) *Louise Michel: anarchist and revolutionary feminist, jailed and exiled for leading the 1871 revolutionary uprising in Paris* (Melbourne, NY: Ocean Press), p. 112. The trial took place after the landmark Invalides demonstration, led by Michel and Emile Pouget, during which the anarchist black flag was waved for the first time. The demonstration resulted a trial after some shop windows were broken and looting occurred.

serialised in 1894 in the London-based periodical *Liberty*, was the great *oeuvre* of her London years. Her output while in London was very substantial and eclectic in terms of genres, comprising the second volume of her memoirs (1890; published in serial form), two novels, some poetry, drama, and even some scientific writing.²⁵ Her contributions to the anarchist press were equally varied and voluminous. She was a regular contributor to two London-based English-language anarchist periodicals, *The Torch* and *Liberty*. *The Torch* (1891–1896) was a publication with strong Italian connections, which also received contributions from steady French and Russian networks. It was launched by the affluent and well-connected siblings Olive, Arthur and Helen Rossetti, who were adolescents at the time. Michel's contributions to the paper either dealt with French politics, or were general pieces about the revolution.²⁶ *Liberty, a Journal of Anarchist Communism*, edited by James Tochatti in Hammersmith, was literary and high-brow in its orientation. It published Michel's *Histoire de la Commune* in serial form, translated into English by her friend, the anarchist poet Louisa Sarah Bevington. It was also in *Liberty* that Michel's statement article 'Why I am anarchist' appeared, as part of a 'Why I am' series.²⁷ Naturally, Michel also wrote for the French exile papers published in London: in September 1894, her friend and fellow exile Charles Malato printed in *Le Tocsin* a previously unpublished paper by Michel entitled 'Les Tocsins' (i.e. 'The alarm bells').²⁸ Her journalistic contributions extended internationally: she was a regular

²⁵ See the complete list in Michel, *La Chasse aux loups*, pp. 337–338.

²⁶ *The Torch*, issue 3, new series, August 1894: Front-page article on 'Trial for Association of Malefactors' (Trial of the 30); issue 7, new series, 18 December 1894: 'The Death Blow'; 18 March 1895: 'Vive la Commune!'

²⁷ *Liberty*, January to November 1895: The Commune of Paris (serialised); Issue 2, third year, February 1896: 'Louise Michel, Notes on her Life'; Issue 3, year 3, March 1896: 'Why I am an anarchist'; August 1896: on the exclusion of anarchists from the London Congress of the Second International.

²⁸ 'Les Tocsins', *Le Tocsin*, 23 September 1894, pp. 2–3.

Michel and the development of anarchist pedagogies: the International Socialist School

The International Socialist School launched by Michel at 19 Fitzroy Street in 1891 must be analysed as part of the broader development of anarchist pedagogical ventures, especially after 1890. Both in England and abroad, anarchists instigated or took part in pioneering educational ventures, with ideas and initiatives circulating transnationally. There were different national contexts for these educational initiatives, which were an important strand of anarchist culture globally, especially after the demise of terrorism as a political strategy in the mid-1890s.⁶⁶ In both France and Britain, libertarian projects were intended to counter the development of public education, which was perceived by anarchists as a form of nationalist indoctrination of the popular classes. By contrast, these anarchist projects were underpinned by a libertarian critique of the pedagogical approaches prevalent in state education, and aimed at individual and collective emancipation through access to knowledge and culture. It was by setting up free schools inspired by shared pedagogic references that libertarian militants sought to offer alternatives which, while limited in their immediate impact, proved very innovative in the longer term.

The history of the International Socialist School instigated and run by Michel is little known. Nor has the school been examined in connection with similar educational developments.

⁶⁶ John Shotton (1993) *No Master High or Low: libertarian education and schooling in Britain, 1890–1990* (Bristol: Libertarian Education); Nathalie Brémand (1992) *Cempuis. Une expérience d'éducation libertaire à l'époque de Jules Ferry 1880–1894* (Paris: Éditions du Monde Libertaire); Paul Avrich (1980) *The Modern School Movement: anarchism and education in the United States* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press); Kirwin R. Shaffer (2003) *Freedom Teaching: anarchism and education in early republican Cuba, 1898–1925*, *The Americas*, 60(2), pp. 151–183.

from other anarchists, such as John Turner and the Frenchman Bernard Lazare, Michel's involvement with the League and its activities may have been overstated by contemporaries, notably as a result of Scotland Yard's efforts to tar the League with an anarchist brush.⁶⁵ It may therefore be erroneous to assume a sustained collaboration. Yet Michel's article points to her engagement with non-strictly anarchist radical movements of her host society, which was quite unusual among anarchist exiles. It is also testimony of her clear interest in and mobilisation for the politics of exile and asylum, which will be discussed further on.

Michel's network-building activities are unique within the pre-1914 French anarchist movement not only in terms of the sheer volume and variety of her connections, spanning both the rank and file of the London groups and elite level and engaging with non-anarchist socialist movements and individuals, but also by combining such activism with the more visible propaganda examined in the previous section. This network-building was a precondition for the development of more formal initiatives (such as speaking tours, publications, etc.); had a major reputational impact on Michel herself and the anarchist movement (granting it visibility for wide audiences as well as among socialist circles); and as a gesture of solidarity and cooperation also had inherent political significance.

Richard Bach Jensen (2013) *The Battle against Anarchist Terrorism: an international history, 1878–1934* (Cambridge: CUP).

⁶⁵ Anne Humpherys (2006) *The Journals that Did: writing about sex in the late 1890s*, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, www.19.bbk.ac.uk accessed 20 July 2016; Anne Humpherys (2003) *The Journal that Did: form and content in The Adult (1897–1899)*, *Media History*, 9(1), pp. 63–78.

contributor to the influential anarchist daily *Le Liberaire*, launched in Paris in 1895 by Sébastien Faure,²⁹ where she often reported on the life of the London groups. The very first issue of the paper contained an article by her, entitled 'Vagabonds' (Vagrants) about the plight of destitute French economic migrants to London.³⁰ Her name also features among the contributors of a dozen French anarchist publications during her 'London years', spanning a wide variety of genres.³¹

Another (transnational) medium for the diffusion of Michel's views was the press interviews which she gave to French journalists, who crossed the Channel in order to interview her.³² This interest from a general readership was mirrored across the Channel by the British press, which regularly reported on her whereabouts and activities, especially at the time of her arrival and during the peak of the anarchist-inspired terrorist period (1890–1894)—in particular the *Pall Mall Gazette*.³³ These pieces are especially revealing of Michel's continuing importance in French politics and her notoriety in British society. Another striking aspect is that they showed Michel repeatedly endorsing the anarchist terrorist attacks which took place at the time—a minority position among anarchists at the time, which merits attention.³⁴ This has done much to contribute to the aforementioned

²⁹ Thomas, *Louise Michel*, p. 384.

³⁰ *Le Liberaire*, 'Vagabonds', 16 November 1895; 15 February 1895, 'L'affaire Lapie'; I, 26; 9 May 1896, 'L'Ogresse – Nouvelles de Londres'.

³¹ René Bianco, *100 ans de presse anarchiste*, available at <http://bianco.ficedl.info/>, entries for 'Louise Michel', accessed 21 September 2016.

³² 'Chez Louise Michel, Visite à une révolutionnaire', *Le XIXe siècle*, 26 September 1890, p. 1; 'Devenue bourgeoise', *La Croix*, 21 August 1894, n.pag.; 'L'anarchie', *L'Eclair*, 31 December 1892.

³³ 'An Interview with Louise Michel', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 August 1890, p. 1; 'Interview with Louise Michel', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 April 1892, p. 2.

³⁴ *L'Eclair*, 31 March 1892; 'Louise Michel', *Le Matin*, 19 December 1893, p. 1.

masculinist and stereotypical accounts of Michel's politics as it portrays her as politically irresponsible. An interview published in the Paris popular daily *Le Matin*, for instance, referred to her as a result as 'an apostle of crime'. While Michel did endorse violence, she did so as a 'means' rather than a 'goal', which was a widely held position among anarchists in the early 1890s, albeit with some individual inflections.³⁵ Furthermore, she was at pains to emphasise that anarchists sought 'absolute freedom' and personal emancipation rather than destructive goals. Such an endorsement of political violence—even if it remained exclusively verbal—may also be interpreted as a willingness to step into direct action, which was an important form of politicisation for anarchist women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as illustrated (or indeed acted out) by figures such as Vera Zasoulitch, Emma Goldman, and Germaine Berton.³⁶ There is scope, then, for a political re-reading of Michel's statements on political violence, distorted by stereotypical accounts of her views and anarchist positions in general. They need to be situated in ideological traditions (anarchist and other) offering different perspectives on the role and limitations of political violence. A more thorough assessment of Michel's views on violence highlights the coherence of her revolutionary outlook, in which individual and collective action was paramount yet instrumental.

Conferences and open-air meetings were major fora for Michel and they allow us to measure her remarkable

³⁵ See for instance Errico Malatesta (2005) *Violence as a Social Factor*, in Robert Graham (Ed.) *Anarchism: a documentary history of libertarian ideas* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), p. 163: 'If we really wish to strive for the emancipation of the people, do not let us reject in principle the means without which the struggle can never be ended; and, remember, the most energetic measures are also the most efficient and the least wasteful.'

³⁶ Jeppensen & Nazar, 'Genders and Sexualities in Anarchist Movements', pp. 168–169.

legend and charisma were such that she was sought after in social circles that had very little to do with anarchism, which was highly unusual in the late 1890s, when anarchism became increasingly marginalised across Europe. The education pioneer Margaret McMillan, who worked at Michel's International socialist school, recalled an encounter between Michel and the well-to-do 'Lady X', who had been 'amused' by stories about Louise and invited her to her house in Park Lane. Michel went, 'being, I think, under the delusion that Lady X. was converted to anarchy'.⁶³ Despite the misunderstanding, the very fact that Michel had been invited is remarkable and testimony of her ability to engage audiences far beyond anarchist circles.

Michel, like several other contemporary anarchists and libertarians, also appears to have had links with the Legitimation League, a free union and free love organisation which aimed to secure legal rights for illegitimate children (which, anecdotally, was Michel's case) and was rooted in the broader ideological environment of late-Victorian secularism and personal rights movements. Its journal, *The Adult*, was launched in June 1897. It was subsequently renamed *The Journal of Sex* and from February 1899 was known as *An Unconventional Journal*. After the League's secretary George Bedborough was arrested for distributing *Sexual Inversion*, Havelock Ellis's then-scandalous book about homosexuality, the editorship of the paper was transferred to the erstwhile anarchist Henry Seymour, who had been close to home-grown and exiled anarchists in the 1880s. Michel's contribution to the paper in 1898 related to the Anti-Anarchist Congress held in Rome that same year—a landmark gathering of international delegates, which coordinated and formalised efforts to police and suppress the international anarchist movement.⁶⁴ While *The Adult* also featured pieces

⁶³ Margaret McMillan (1927) *The Life of Rachel McMillan* (London: JM Dent & Sons), p. 65.

⁶⁴ Louise Michel (February 1899) *The Anti-Anarchist Congress at Rome, 1898*, *An Unconventional Journal*, n.pag.; about the Rome conference, see

Michel was one of very few women prominent in both national and international anarchist circles, familiar with the most revered anarchists and labour militants of her time and counted as one of them. Only a handful of women occupied such a place at the time, notably Emma Goldman and, to a lesser extent, Lucy Parsons (the widow of one of the anarchists executed in Chicago in 1887). These women were naturally part of Michel's networks of contacts: she met Goldman in London in 1895 and four years later shared a platform with her in London.⁶¹ Within international anarchist circles, while Michel was not as distinguished a figure as fellow British exile Peter Kropotkin, she was comparable to him in terms of her transnational and transpolitical relations. Her networks covered a wide spectrum of political opinion across the entire socialist movement and extended, very controversially, to the French monarchist far-right, with the notorious Duchesse d'Uzès and Henri de Rochefort. The latter was Michel's lifelong friend, a Communard and fellow deportee to New Caledonia and, for a short period, a London exile too. He also supported her financially until her death.⁶²

Whilst her friendship with Rochefort proved very polemic at times, all these links attested to Michel's appeal and provided a significant reputational (and occasionally material) asset for the movement at a time when anarchism became isolated from socialist organisations at both the national and international level, especially after 1896, when anarchists were expelled from the Second International. In Britain as well as France, Michel's

with London's women's groups, there are even female artists who have an exhibition at the moment.⁷

⁶¹ Maclellan, *Louise Michel*, p. 108.

⁶² Under the Third Republic, however, Rochefort became a very controversial figure, being chiefly associated with the General Boulanger's coup, anti-Dreyfusard antisemitism and nationalist agitation: Roger L. Williams (1966) *Henri Rochefort, Prince of the Gutter Press* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

appeal. Her activism was internationalist in its focus and transnational in its reach, and she engaged with her host country by learning English—an exception among the exiles.³⁷ The militant calendar of the London exile groups was based around the celebration of key dates: 18 March for the Paris Commune, May Day (from 1891 onwards), and 11 November to commemorate the execution of the Chicago anarchists in 1887. On these dates, the exile groups gathered for celebrations and speeches given by high-profile international figures. Michel was often the most sought-after speaker³⁸—often the only woman taking part, although British anarchist women, such as Mrs Tochetti, Agnes Henry or Charlotte Wilson at times took to the platform, as did occasional visitors like the Americans Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman. This calendar also included recreational or one-off political events, in which Michel often participated, such as funerals, lecture tours by foreign anarchists and protest meetings to raise awareness for specific causes.³⁹ Given that accounts of these various events were reprinted in numerous anarchist periodicals that had a substantial transnational circulation and international readership, Michel's speeches had a significant impact. They were also relayed in the non-anarchist press, sometimes with great detail about both their contents and reception.⁴⁰ As a

³⁷ Michel, *Histoire de ma vie*, Xaviere Gauthier (Ed.) p. 160.

³⁸ See for instance (among many similar items) *The Torch*, 15 November 1891: Commemoration of Chicago at South Place Institute; 15 April 1892; 15 April 1893, Commune commemoration; *Freedom*, March 1899 (Paris Commune commemoration in Shoreditch Town Hall).

³⁹ For instance, she gave the concluding conference on 'L'Art futur' at the end of the 'Grande Soirée' where Charles Malato's one-act vaudeville was performed on 27 March 1893 (see flyer reprinted in Charles Malato (1897) *Les Joyeusetés de l'exil* (Paris: Acratie, 1985), p. 96; Along with Kropotkin, she spoke at the funeral of the wife of Spanish revolutionary Tarrida Del Marmol, *L'Intransigeant*, 'Nécrologie', 17 January 1900, p. 2.

⁴⁰ See for instance 'Mademoiselle Louise Michel', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 14 September 1890, p. 1; 'Louise Michel's Mission to England', *St James Gazette*, 27 August 1890, p. 11.

result, Michel was one amidst a handful of (predominantly male) high-profile anarchists, who drew the crowds and were instrumental in the development of practical internationalism in London, where anarchist contingents from many different countries coexisted but often without much interaction. Her international appeal and predilection for discussing and celebrating internationalism made her a key figure to promote international solidarity. For example, in 1890 she was invited by a German anarchist to speak at a gathering and specifically to ‘discuss a little the union of peoples or the International’.⁴¹ The promotion of internationalism was indeed a central feature of Michel’s activism, which echoed her universalist perspectives and underpinned many of her political endeavours—this is another area where her remarkable coherence and very original outlook can be observed.

Michel’s crowd appeal made her a uniquely effective fundraiser for the movement. The proceedings of these events served various purposes: providing support for deprived exiles in London; funding one-off and awareness-raising campaigns, for instance an overseas conference tour intended to collect additional funds;⁴² publishing papers; covering legal costs for anarchist comrades facing trials; and providing financial help for anarchist families in distress. Some of the money raised was also sent back to France to serve similar campaigns. Michel herself also took part in several conference tours in France while based in London, for instance in 1895 and 1896, and again just before her death, in 1904–1905.⁴³

⁴¹ Letter from Capt dated 7 November 1890, Louise Michel Collection, ‘Correspondance adressée à Louise Michel’, item 148, IISH.

⁴² *Gil Blas*, 8 October 1895, ‘Hors de France’, p. 3 reports conference by Louise Michel on 13 September at South Place Institute before her departure for the United States and South America. The tour was intended to raise funds towards the opening of an ‘*asile des proscrits*’, which Michel was very keen on.

⁴³ See for instance ‘Communications’, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 7 December 1895, p. 4; ‘Le Mouvement social’, 20 June 1896, p. 2.

our acquaintance we have all reasons to be doubly on our guard.⁵⁷

Michel did indeed receive and responded to a staggering number of requests for help, even at times offering her own money to support near-strangers. A French journalist who interviewed her in London reported that ‘to every beggar passing by, Michel stopped and gave a penny, so that after fifteen minutes her purse was empty and she resorted to mine’.⁵⁸ This is but one manifestation of her remarkable generosity and selflessness. However, equally remarkable—despite some seeming errors of judgment, as suggested above—was her considerable skill in mobilising networks of support for advice, money, employment, housing or militant purposes.⁵⁹ Another noteworthy aspect, which points to the gendered dimensions of this form of activism, was her constancy in developing women’s networks for a variety of purposes, as indicated by the sheer volume of her female correspondents, and her continual efforts to support and organise individuals and groups of women.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Alfred Marsh papers, IISH, item 62, letter from Kropotkin to Marsh dated 9 January 1900.

⁵⁸ ‘Chez Louise Michel. Visite à une révolutionnaire’, *Le XIXe siècle*, 26 September 1890, p. 1.

⁵⁹ See for example Louise Michel archive, IISH, item 1023: Letter from Michel to Victor Richard (a London-based French exile, whose grocery shop was one of the rallying points of the French anarchists in London): ‘My dear Richard, the comrade I am sending to you was recommended to me by all Paris friends’, before suggesting that two London comrades help him find laundry work.

⁶⁰ See for example Louise Michel Papers, IISH, item 5, letter from Michel dated 20 August 1900 (London); no clear addressee. Also items 54–56: correspondence about organising support for a Russian woman and her children referred to Michel by a common acquaintance. Louise Michel Papers, IISH, April 1902. Letter to Pauline Savari, who organises exhibitions displaying works of art by women. Michel gives her the address of Mrs Angele Marietti, in the United States, adding: ‘It is an international group for the complete emancipation of women ... It may also be possible to organise something

due to her links with both the anarchist 'elite' or 'intelligentsia' similarly present in London, and the broader French and international groups making up London's anarchist circles. This was most unusual in a movement which, despite its fiercely egalitarian ethos, was in practice quite segregated between an influential 'elite' of prominent theorists, activists, journalists, and speakers (to which Michel undoubtedly belonged), and a heterogeneous rank and file.⁵⁵ Michel's connections spanned these different strata. This is attested in particular by her address books, held at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, comprising the details of a very wide range of contacts, also by her correspondence and the very last chapter of her 1904 memoirs, 'Ma vie à Londres', where she reminisces about her life and acquaintances in London and internationally.⁵⁶ Her links with and support for the less-well-known London exiles were often characterised as regrettable consequences of her gullibility and misplaced sense of charity, while her willingness to help strangers and introduce them into the fairly secretive anarchist milieu often drew criticisms from fellow anarchists. Peter Kropotkin, for instance, told the British anarchist Alfred Marsh:

That Sunday Louise Michel came to me with 2 Frenchmen whom she brings with her from Paris. Absolute strangers to her and to anyone of the comrades ... Both produce a most unpleasant impression. Both are not anarchists ... Louise, with her usual good naturedness, has even promised them to have their paper printed in Freedom office ... With people who use Louise to enter into

⁵⁵ Bantman, 'Internationalism without an International'.

⁵⁶ See the lists and diaries held in the Louise Michel Collection, IISH, items 57, 58, 674. These lists include all the high-profile anarchists of the time; see also the last chapter of her memoirs: Michel, *Histoire de ma vie*, Xavier Gauthier (Ed.) esp. pp. 160–162.

This transnational circulation of money was common within anarchism: 'Louise Michel has sent 100 francs from London, the proceeds from a conference on "The future of Anarchy", to comrade Leboucher, 75 bd de la Villette', a spy thus reported in 1890.⁴⁴ Her ability to earn money through such activities also gave her an atypical place and near-professional status within anarchist circles: the only French anarchist woman, at the time, able to live off the proceedings from public speaking. She, however, distributed the money earned very generously and was therefore frequently dependent on financial support from her friends.⁴⁵ Such financial autonomy was not without complexities. It gave some a reason to tarnish her reputation and others to exploit her financially.⁴⁶

Michel was also active at the 'institutional' level of anarchist politics whilst in London. Before moving to London, she had already been a delegate at the 1881 Social Revolutionary London congress, a pivotal moment in the development of the international anarchist movement.⁴⁷ In 1896, now a London resident, she was also enlisted as an anarchist delegate to the London Congress of the Second International, which

⁴⁴ AN F712505, unsigned report dated 8 October 1890.

⁴⁵ Kerignard, 'Les femmes', pp. 461–462. See Michel's constant pleas for help in her letters to Rochefort and Vaughan, for instance Louise Michel papers, IISH, items 50 and 51, letter dated 2 January 1890, asking for money to be sent 'as soon as possible this month, because we have absolutely nothing'; also letter dated 10 March 1891: 'I thank you infinitely because we were really were in severe hardship'; 19 July 1891 requesting rent money and also for clothes: 'I had to dress up because I am going to be introduced to a former friend whom you may know, who wants to publish my *Histoire de la Commune*'.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *Louise Michel*, p. 346, describes Michel's role in London as 'a pipeline between penniless refugees and Rochefort's money'. Rochefort himself was extremely critical of the anarchists' financial exploitation of Michel: *L'Intransigeant*, 'Les anarchistes peints par eux-mêmes', 22 January 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Max Nettlau (1972) *Anarchisten und Sozialrevolutionäre, Geschichte der Anarchie*, vol. III (Verlag Detlev Auvermann KG), pp. 202–231.

eventually sealed the anarchists' exclusion from the organisation.⁴⁸ Following this eviction, Michel took part in the very well-attended fringe meetings of anarchists and antiparlamentarians, which took place from 28 July onwards, along with prominent revolutionary militants, as well as British socialists Tom Mann and James Keir Hardie. These events marked the beginning of a fruitful rapprochement between the anarchists and several groupings and individuals critical of parliamentary socialism.⁴⁹

Michel's manifold propaganda activities thus testify to her sustained, coherent but nonetheless wide-ranging and highly articulate political engagement across a very wide range of political mediums, and stands in marked contrast to the more traditional accounts which portray her as vague, general and over-emphatic. She certainly was an international 'star'⁵⁰ beyond anarchist circles, acutely aware of her image and 'the potential of her self-representation and platforms',⁵¹ but this should not be equated with a lack of political substance since all her interventions were underpinned by a clear and consistent political vision. This diversity and coherence amply challenges the masculinist stereotyping and provides a different assessment of Michel's skills as a prolific activist.

Sociability: Michel's relational activism

Michel's sociability is another facet of her activism which has been grossly neglected, probably because it is regarded as private and therefore not political. And yet, this was another

⁴⁸ Augustin Hamon Papers, IISH, Correspondence, letter from Errico Malatesta to Hamon, 20 July 1896.

⁴⁹ 'Les conférences anarchistes de Londres', *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 22 August 1896, p. 2. According to the author, the meeting held on 28 July had drawn a 3000-strong audience.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *Louise Michel*, p. 174.

⁵¹ Michel, *La Chasse aux Loups*, p. 17.

sphere where Michel expressed and enacted her political ideals, in particular solidarity and internationalism. Unlike the forms of militancy examined in the previous section, which are usually regarded as traditional, formal and primarily masculine modes of political engagement, Michel's sociability and networking might be interpreted more as feminine modes of activism. Networking practices were central to the pre-1914 anarchist movement, which relied on informal entanglements rather than formal groupings, especially in transnational settings.⁵² As such, developing connections was not a strongly gendered activity in anarchist circles. Yet Michel's activities may be also be analysed and understood through a more gendered lens if we use the concept of 'relational activism', borrowed from social movement theory. According to Kennedy and O'Shaughnessy, this refers to informal entanglements and networking activities which are a key and highly gendered form of women's activism.⁵³ Women's historians such as Barbara Bush and June Purvis furthermore have long argued that a focus on networks is one way of restating the coherence of women's militant action.⁵⁴ A political and gendered interpretation of Michel's sociability is overdue and will demonstrate that her social connections were exceptional in terms of their cross-community, cross-social class and their transpolitical and transnational reach, and provided the anarchist movement with a considerable reputational asset.

Michel's sociability was atypical—perhaps even transgressive—from the perspective of anarchist and exile politics. This was

⁵² Constance Bantman (2006) Internationalism without an International: cross-Channel anarchist networks, 1880–1914, *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 84(4), pp. 961–981.

⁵³ Sara O'Shaughnessy & Emily Huddart Kennedy (2010) Relational Activism: Reimagining Women's Environmental Work as Cultural Change, *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 35(4), pp. 551–572.

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