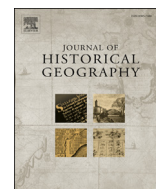




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## Why the history and philosophy of geography matter: Louise Michel's radical, anticolonial, and pluralist geographies

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## ABSTRACT

In this short paper, I contend that the history and philosophy of geography should be considered as an indispensable scholarly field to nourish both theoretical speculations about geography and ongoing scholars' political and social engagement towards critical, radical, decolonial, feminist and antiracist geographies. I argue that rediscovering 'other geographical traditions' is paramount to these scholarly and political agendas. After briefly summarising my political and theoretical references, I discuss the example of the work of anarchist, feminist and anticolonial activist Louise Michel (1830–1905) to make the case for the inclusion of new figures and ideas in the field of new decolonial, multilingual and pluralist histories of geography.

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In this short paper, I first and foremost aim to launch a militant plea, which endorses historical and theoretical approaches to geography. This plea is also a liberating challenge to charges that historical and cultural geographers, historians of geography and critical scholars in general face daily in most geography departments around the world. Explicitly or implicitly, we are constantly told that we are irrelevant, that while we chatter the real income comes from others doing concrete things such as GIS and similar, that nobody understands what we say and that, at best, what we do is nice and interesting, but ultimately a luxury that the neoliberal university cannot afford. I would instead argue that it is time to say boldly that, if all our overt or implicit detractors are where they are it is because, one day, someone fought to make geography a scholarly discipline with epistemological statutes and prestigious genealogies.

My main argument is that fostering the relevance of geography today does not mean pleasing marketing logics by offering mediocre notions of 'employability' for paying customers in our classes. As Johnston and Sidaway suggested of Anglo-American departments in the second half of the twentieth century, when 'disciplines and scholars had to prove their relevance and sell their skills in the market-place [then] academic freedom was ... curtailed, simply by denying it resources'.<sup>1</sup> Similar processes are currently ongoing within and beyond the anglosphere, in the

framework of dominant neoliberal ideas accepting market's dogmas on the commodification of knowledge.

In contrast, I contend that the relevance of geography is in its capacity to foster consciousness of social issues and to help individuals to acquire their own critical tools to transform society by gaining more justice, equality and inclusion. For this, the history and philosophy of geography (hereafter HPG) is indispensable, because without their historical frames radical and critical approaches would not make sense, and geography would become uncritical learning of technical skills.

### For relevant and engaged histories of geography

To this end, it is paramount to adopt epistemic pluralism and to refuse dogmatic stances such as the adoption of universal models against which people and places are normalised. This is shown by scholarship arguing for the need to use theory as a toolbox rather than as a unique model.<sup>2</sup> Decolonial and pluriversal critiques of epistemicides also value forms of knowledge that are different from Euro-centric theories.<sup>3</sup> As the term 'epistemicide' mainly refers to the colonial and postcolonial destruction of different ways of

<sup>2</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013); Claudio Minca, 'Postmodernism/Postmodern Geography', in *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* ed. By Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 363–72.

<sup>3</sup> Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (eds.), *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Johnston and James D. Sidaway, *Geography and Geographers* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 32.

thinking, epistemic pluralism also challenges what I call the arrogance of Big Theory.

I mean by this definition an attitude that is adopted by several scholars, regardless the kind of theories that they embrace, and which implicitly or explicitly alleges that dealing with archives, empirical research and specific cases is considered as less 'prestigious' than discussing pure theory. For instance, the latter is often expected to give scholarly works more 'marketable' value when targeting publication in important journals. Puzzlingly, it seems that this prejudice applies also when discussing 'theory' only means rereading super-famous authors whose works were discussed thousands of times just to add a nuance, without making any effort to try an empirical application. Against that, growing trends in HPG show the scholarly effectiveness of dealing with primary sources, contexts, places, biographies, materialities and mobilities in the production of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Decolonial thinkers argue in parallel that methodological decolonisation implies placing centre stage praxes before addressing theories.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, I would contend that one could hardly pretend to do 'critical theory' without some historical awareness of a discipline whose early authors often anticipated current trends, which is apparent in the well-known mechanisms of the cyclical return of old theories.<sup>6</sup> For instance, recent scholarship highlights the contributions that nineteenth-century geographical traditions are bringing to current debates on the Anthropocene.<sup>7</sup> This is exactly what Clarence Glacken (1909–1989) meant as a challenge to the pretention of contemporaries to have invented everything without wondering that certain notions may have a genealogy that it is worth knowing before applying such ideas to current matters.<sup>8</sup>

Transnationalism and internationalism are well established trends in historical geography.<sup>9</sup> Yet several claims are being released for considering different viewpoints in HPG toward increasing linguistic and cultural pluralism and the inclusion of different places such as what is commonly called the Global South.<sup>10</sup> In particular, multilingualism has been deemed essential in order to overturn Euro and Anglo-American hegemonies over the discipline, to decolonise it in theory and practice.<sup>11</sup> To this end, addressing different and multilingual archives proves to be a useful way of discovering alternative geographical traditions by reconstructing transnational circulations of knowledge, so as to include

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Baigent and André Reyes Novaes, 'Not Just Rounding up the Usual Suspects: Hugh Clout and Geography's Stories', in *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 39, ed. by André Reyes Novaes and Elizabeth Baigent (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 1–26; Heike Jöns, 'Boundary-Crossing Academic Mobilities in Global Knowledge Economies: New Research Agendas Based on Triadic Thought', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 16 (2018) 1–11; David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Raúl Zibechi, *Mundos otros y pueblos en movimiento. Debates sobre anti-colonialismo y transición en América Latina* (Bogotá: Ediciones desde Abajo, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> David N. Livingstone, 'Changing Climate, Human Evolution, and the Revival of Environmental Determinism', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86 (2012) 564–595.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Barclay Larsen and John Harrington jr., 'Geographic Thought and the Anthropocene: What Geographers Have Said and Have to Say', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111 (2020) 729–741.

<sup>8</sup> International Dialogue Project, 'Interview with Clarence Glacken', 1980, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz22mbXsw94&feature=youtu.be> last accessed 14 March 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Jake Hodder, Stephen Legg and Mike Heffernan, 'Introduction: Historical Geographies of Internationalism, 1900–1950', *Political Geography* 49 (2015) 1–6.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Craggs and Hannah Neate, 'What Happens if We Start from Nigeria? Diversifying Histories of Geography', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110 (2020) 899–916; Federico Ferretti and Breno Viotto Pedrosa, 'Inventing Critical Development: A Brazilian Geographer and His Northern Networks', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 43 (2018) 703–717.

<sup>11</sup> Federico Ferretti, 'History and Philosophy of Geography III: Global Histories of Geography, Statues that Must Fall and a Radical and Multilingual Turn', *Progress in Human Geography* 46 (2022) 716–725.

in geography figures who were previously excluded from the discipline due to their professional, gender, ethnic or geographical eccentricity in relation to the dominating canons of their time.<sup>12</sup>

Methodologically, this emphasis on transnationalism and archives matches literature on global intellectual history which discusses the need to diversify archives in order to do research beyond national or linguistic barriers.<sup>13</sup> Projects such as Archiving Activism give value to radical histories in relation to current matters.<sup>14</sup> This idea chimes with the ambition of dealing with the past to organise the present that was famously expressed by French *Annaliste* historian Lucien Febvre (1878–1956).<sup>15</sup> While all militant historiography should evidently be wary of anachronism, it is worth noting that, in the history of ideas, only contextual readings allow the identification of the unorthodoxy and nonconformism of certain authors in their places and periods, in such way as to enable contemporary scholars to understand dissidence and plurality beyond normal trends and dominating paradigms.<sup>16</sup> In this vein, I briefly discuss works of French anarchist, anticolonialist and feminist activist Louise Michel as a case for performing HPGs that can talk to current critical, antiracist and decolonial approaches (see Fig. 1).

### Louise Michel, and geography

Louise Michel was born in 1830 to a single mother who served in Vroncourt Castle, in the French countryside, a son of the elderly landlord being probably Louise's father. She soon embraced the secular values of the 1848–51 Second Republic. After the 1851 coup d'état by Napoleon III, Michel opened a free school, self-managed institute, which was the only option to work for teachers 'who refused to swear for the Empire' and could not find an official post in the public system.<sup>17</sup> Her early nonconformism was not limited to educational matters, as she also had clear ideas on female emancipation, refusing all proposals of marriage that she received by older men who wanted to indoctrinate her 'like soft wax'.<sup>18</sup> She would later come to the conclusion that marriage was nothing else than a form of legal 'prostitution'.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1860s, while working as a teacher in Paris, Michel met anarchist geographers Elie (1827–1904) and Elisée Reclus (1830–1905), who alongside common friends such as André Léo (pseudonym of Léodile Champseix-Béra, 1824–1900), co-founded the first feminist associations in France with Michel and other opponents of the Second Empire.<sup>20</sup> It was during the 1871 Paris Commune that Michel acquired huge notoriety as a legendary fighter within the movement of women struggling for both female emancipation and social revolution.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, the Commune was also a watershed for French radicals in gaining consciousness of the colonial problem. Before the Commune, most French socialists

<sup>12</sup> Federico Ferretti, 'Rediscovering Other Geographical Traditions', *Geography Compass* 13 (2019) e12421.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Baring, 'Ideas on the Move: Context in Transnational Intellectual History', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77 (2016) 567–587.

<sup>14</sup> <https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2018/05/archiving-activism-website-launch.html> last accessed 14 March 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Colin, 1953).

<sup>16</sup> Ferretti, 'Other Geographical Traditions'.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Michel, *Mémoires de Louise Michel écrits par elle-même* (Paris: Roy, 1886), p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Michel, *Mémoires*, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Michel, *Mémoires*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Federico Ferretti, 'Anarchist Geographers and Feminism in Late 19th Century France: the Contributions of Elisée and Elie Reclus', *Historical Geography* 44 (2016) 68–88.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Michel, *La Commune* (Paris: Stock, 1898).



Fig. 1. Ernest Appert. Portrait of Louise Michel in 1871. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louise\\_Michel\\_par\\_Appert.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louise_Michel_par_Appert.jpg)

did not clearly oppose settler colonialism in Algeria.<sup>22</sup> After 1871, it was in anarchist geographical circuits that anticolonial consciousness started to be spread, inspiring Elisée Reclus's commentaries on the sanguinary repression of the Commune during the Bloody Week.<sup>23</sup>

On that occasion, starting from the supposed 'brightness' of military leaders committed to colonial massacres, Reclus noted sarcastically that: 'Brilliant officers, accustomed to the massacre of Arabs and Kabyles, came back to Paris to execute other "savages" and swept the popular neighbourhoods with their ordnance, as they had made with poor Arab villages'.<sup>24</sup> Usually, what was not allowed in Europe in terms of violations of human rights was instead allowed in the colonies.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the use of colonial troops in Paris made a strong impression. After the Bloody Week of late May 1871, Michel was imprisoned and later sentenced to deportation in New Caledonia, a French possession in the South Pacific that served as a penal colony, and one of the islands on which successful geographers' and travellers' reports were published at that time. There, from 1872 to 1880, Michel abandoned the Eurocentric, colonialist and racist

mindset that still characterised European workers' movements, paralleling and nourishing Reclus's anticolonial geographies.

In New Caledonia, Michel developed a sensitivity very close to what Benedict Anderson called anti-colonial imagination, being among the rare deported Communards who fraternized with local indigenous, the Kanaks, and supported their 1878 anti-colonial insurrection.<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Hart highlights Michel's interest for gender issues in the Kanak communities in comparing the despising judgements that both women and 'savages' suffered.<sup>27</sup> Michel edited a series of Kanak popular tales and songs in which she developed, having engaged with local languages and cultures, the same principle of empathy that the Recluses were trying to apply towards non-European peoples, particularly the so-called primitives.<sup>28</sup>

Michel took inspiration from a poem titled *Idara* written by an elderly Kanak woman, relating the history of European uneven occupation and theft of indigenous territory. According to Hart: '*Idara* is not just another folktale viewed as an exotic artifact; it is an antiracist, anti-colonial document, perhaps the first of its kind. Yet it is also a celebration of ... the special role a woman can assume in that tradition'.<sup>29</sup> Introducing her anthology of Kanak songs and tales, which included a dictionary testifying the depth of Michel's linguistic and cultural engagement with her interlocutors, Michel addressed Europeans by claiming that: 'You have your maps, where you see New Caledonia'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, these maps did not show what Europeans should have listened to, that is: 'Our Black bards, singing the epopee of stone ages ... who say like yours: "the songs had ceased"', to express death and defeat, that is to protest against colonisation.<sup>31</sup> Michel identified the oppressed indigenous with 'the people', ironically upsetting the language of the conservative press which mocked the Commune deportees calling them 'Kanak'. For French respectable bourgeois, they all were 'savages' and had to be kept far from the homeland's boundaries.<sup>32</sup>

In her recollections, Michel recounted how she split in two pieces her red scarf, souvenir of the Commune, to share it with her indigenous friends, to symbolically state that they were fighting the same war.<sup>33</sup> Michel's drawings accompanying the publication of Kanak texts, which mainly represented Caledonian views and landscapes (Fig. 2), reveal the presence of the same geographical imagination that was popularized by the Recluses, targeting universal brotherhood rather than colonisation. It is worth noting that, beyond her political connections with the Reclus family, Michel did not have any direct link with the world of 'professional' geography as we would understand it today. Yet, her works played a role in informing a militant geographical imagination. Alongside those of other deportees, her memoirs were echoed in the pages that Elisée Reclus dedicated to New Caledonia in his geographical works, denouncing the antisocial function of French penal colonies by stressing how, in their overseas possessions, the French were deemed: 'Detested exploiters and feared visitors'.<sup>34</sup> Thanks to

<sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2006); Louise Michel, *Exil en Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: Editions Magellan, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Hart, 'Oral Culture and Anticolonialism in Louise Michel's *Mémoires* (1886) and *Légendes et chants de gestes canaques* (1885)', *Nineteenth Century French Studies* 30 (2001) 107–120.

<sup>28</sup> Federico Ferretti, 'The Murderous Civilization': Anarchist Geographies, Ethnography and Cultural Differences in the Works of Elie Reclus', *cultural geographies*, 24 (2017) 111–129.

<sup>29</sup> Hart, 'Oral Culture', p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> Louise Michel, *Légendes et chants de gestes canaques* (Paris: Kéva, 1885), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Michel, *Légendes*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Michel, *Légendes*.

<sup>33</sup> Michel, *Exil*.

<sup>34</sup> Elisée Reclus, *L'Homme et la Terre*, vol. II (Paris: Librairie internationale, 1905), p. 406.

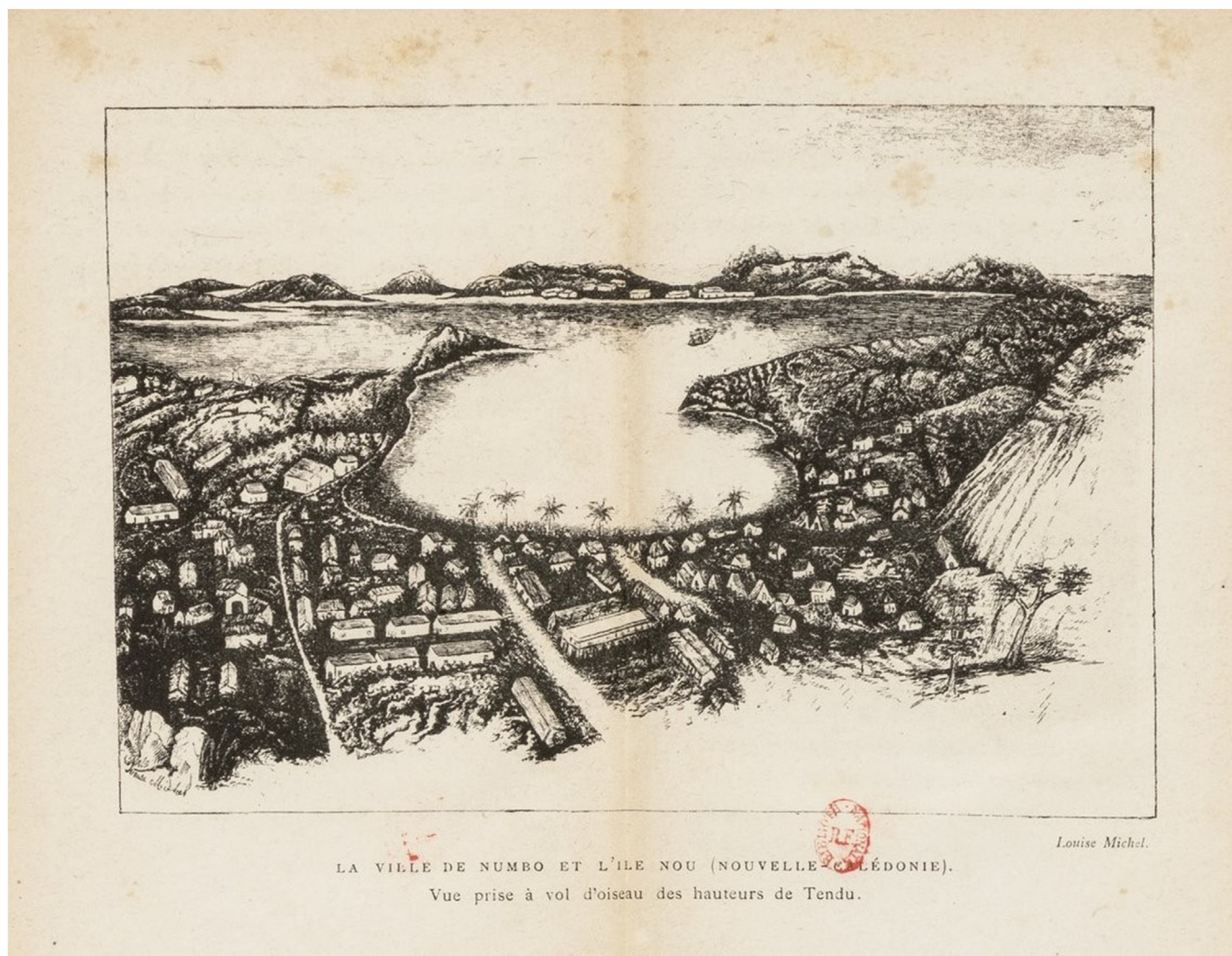
<sup>22</sup> Jean-Louis Marçot, *Comment est née l'Algérie française* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (Bruxelles: Kiste-maeckers, 1876).

<sup>24</sup> Elisée Reclus, *Correspondance*, vol. II (Paris: Schleicher, 1911), p. 339.

<sup>25</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Réclame, 1950).





**Fig. 2.** Louise Michel's 1875 drawing representing Nouméa and the Nou Island, where the main prison for deported Communards was located. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3165001>.

Reclus's and Michel's works, anti-colonial consciousness was progressively spread in activist milieus, especially around works such as the 1903 collective book *Patriotisme et Colonisation*, prefaced by Elisée Reclus.<sup>35</sup>

In 1904, the by then elderly Michel, accompanied by French anarchist Ernest Girault (1871–1933) and a small group of fellows, travelled to Algeria for an anti-militarist and anti-colonialist propaganda tour. French historian Clotilde Chauvin recently reconstructed their itinerary and republished Girault's recollections, preciously rediscovering an episode which had been almost forgotten in anarchist historiography. In New Caledonia, Michel had fraternised with Algerian activists who were likewise deported there with the Communards, because they 'also revolted against oppression'.<sup>36</sup> For that reason, she gained personal prestige among the 'indigenous', something rare for French activists in Algeria due to the huge spread of national and religious hatred that always implied big challenges for anarchists there.<sup>37</sup> At the time of Michel's journey, the non-numerous

anarchists, socialists and free-thinkers then settled in Algeria claimed for social inclusion of all communities through education 'for all children—indigenous, Spanish, Italian and French'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Michel wanted to go all over Algeria for talking 'to the Arabs and the Jews'.<sup>39</sup> During her journey, many bystanders remained struck by their first sight of French people defending the indigenous.

Interestingly, other socialist women such as Paule Minck, who had been close to anarchism during the Paris Commune, and Hubertine Auclert visited Algeria to study Kabyle 'republican and communist institutions'.<sup>40</sup> This confirms how the understanding that indigenous peoples could have something to teach to European workers had its supporters in socialistic and especially anarchist milieus, also thanks to women's activism. For Chauvin, Michel's tour gained sympathisers to the anarchist cause, despite 'the fury of the nationalists, of the anti-Semites and of the Spanish [religious] fanatics', which reveals what difficulties they faced.<sup>41</sup> Yet, these recollections show that these activists' position was not limited to

<sup>35</sup> Jean Grave (ed.) *Patriotisme et colonisation* (Paris: Temps Nouveaux, 1903).

<sup>36</sup> Clotilde Chauvin, *Louise Michel en Algérie* (Oléron: Les Editions libertaires, 2007), p. 23; E. Girault, *Une colonie d'enfer* (Oléron: Les Editions libertaires, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Philippe Bouba, *L'anarchisme en situation coloniale, le cas de l'Algérie. Organisation, militants et presse* (Thèse de doctorat, Perpignan/Oran, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Chauvin, *Louise Michel*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Girault, *Une colonie d'enfer*, p. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Chauvin, *Louise Michel*, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Chauvin, *Louise Michel*, p. 53.

commiseration and denunciation of colonial crimes but considered the potential of subaltern agency by encouraging people to revolt.

### **Conclusion**

As it has been shown in this short text, Michel's case expressed early antiracist, anticolonialist, feminist and broadly (as one would say today) intersectional approaches, fostering at the same time anti-racism, opposition to patriarchy and class consciousness. For

geography, this means that 'non-geographer' Michel participated in the construction of other geographical traditions through her collaboration with the Reclus brothers in infusing early anarchist geographies with feminist and anticolonial concerns through her denunciation of French penal colonies overseas, sympathy for non-European cultures and solidarity to anti-colonial revolts from New Caledonia to Algeria. Today, to decolonise geography's practices, epistemes and memories, the inclusion of new radical and pluralistic histories of geography will prove decisive.