Decolonizing Warsaw

The multiple afterlives of ‘Ali’¹

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‘Ali’ (hereafter Ali) was the codename of August Agboola Browne, also known by alternate spellings of his first, middle and even last names. Since the early 2010s, in both Poland and beyond, Browne has become one of the most recognized resistance soldiers fighting in Warsaw against the German Nazis during the Second World War, even though historical sources attesting to his involvement in the Polish Home Army are scarce and sometimes mutually contradictory. Browne’s life story and visual representations have been revealed and reframed in recent years through scholarly communication, media coverage, cultural production, commemorative events and memory activism. Why has the case of Ali garnered such widespread attention? The simplest, and often repeated, answer is that it is due to his Nigerian descent. Ali is believed to have been the only black combatant in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, the 63-day long resistance operation to liberate Warsaw from German Nazi occupation. However, when this apparently straightforward explanation is examined further, it seems to provoke more confusion than understanding. Clearly, a more critical and reflective approach is called for in this case. Accordingly, the principal objectives of this chapter are firstly to identify the main social actors reanimating the long-dead Ali in contemporary Warsaw; secondly, to analyse the most important functions this rediscovered historical figure is being employed for; and, finally, to discuss the ways the figure of Ali could potentially regain its own positionality in this haunted performance.

While the point of departure for this chapter is what happened with the images of Ali alongside their associated stories and values during the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising in 2019, it also traces their earlier circulation and evolution in the city through the creative practices of artists and scholars, NGO projects and activities undertaken by several Warsaw museums. After decades of being silenced, the spectre of Ali keeps reappearing in various representations, and, as such, he haunts the Polish public sphere. To account for his intermediate status between (unsuccessful) oblivion and (elusive) hyper-visualization, this chapter relies on the notions of repression and re-emergence as modalities of managing and practising colonial heritage, as proposed by Casper Andersen, Britta Timm Knudsen

and Christoffer Kølvraa (2019) within their larger contribution to the decolonial paradigm (Knudsen and Andersen 2019). According to Kølvraa (2019a, 2019b), ‘the concept of repression simultaneously connotes the forceful rejection of a past experience, and its “return” or lingering existence despite this effort’, while re-emergence is ‘the modality through which we seek to capture those practices carrying the promise of entangling the colonial past with the hope of better futures, yet in a state of becoming’. As Knudsen (2019) argues, re-emergence may express itself ‘through hauntings/spectrality—staged or just unveiled—that give rise to activism and responsibility often afforded by affects, moods and atmospheres’. Re-emergence allows for ‘the creation of old/new assemblages having the capacity to open up pluriverse epistemologies, entangled materialities and communal efforts that avoid the trap of identity politics’ (Knudsen 2019). In the case of Ali, the potential of re-emergence may be identified not only in an increasing presence of his material representations in Warsaw’s cityscape, reproduced socially and in a sense sacralized, but also in the social energy that this process involves and evokes.

The chapter chiefly draws on two sources. The first of these are the findings of research conducted collectively at the Museum of Warsaw (ECHOES 2018) as part of the Horizon 2020 ECHOES project. Between 2015 and 2017, the museum purchased two out of a series of visually striking portraits of Ali painted by Polish visual artist Karol Radziszewski (b. 1980). These portraits were then exhibited, one after another, in the museum’s core exhibition *The Things of Warsaw*, opened to the public in two separate phases in 2017 and 2018 (see Bukowiecki 2019). The assumptions, narrative and impact of this exhibition were learnt from a close ethnographical reading of the exhibition, individual interviews with its curators (see Bukowiecki and Wawrzyniak 2019) and focus group interviews with three groups of visitors (see Głowacka-Grajper 2020).

The other main source was the results of complementary research on Ali’s recent career in Polish public discourse, the activities of other Warsaw museums in this regard, and the assumptions and results of memory activism that have arisen around the issue of establishing a monument to commemorate Ali in Warsaw’s urban public space. The latter process was initiated in January 2018 by an NGO called the *Wolność i Pokój* (Freedom and Peace) Foundation and developed in cooperation with the Warsaw city authorities. This joint initiative resulted in the erection of a commemorative monolith to Ali in Stefan ‘Wiech’ Wiechecki Passage in the very centre of Warsaw on 2 August 2019, just one day after the official celebration of the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. The parts of the chapter that draw on these complementary sources are based mainly on existing data, such as an exhibition catalogue (MSN 2017), a press interview with an artist (Dubrowska 2017), or a video recording from the monument’s unveiling ceremony (FPF 2019). However, the chapter also relies on the author’s correspondence with a Warsaw Rising Museum’s (MPW) spokesperson and an interview with Dr.

Dariusz Zalewski, who initiated memory activism resulting in the creation of the Ali memorial.

The reader should note that the biography of Browne himself, his family and their descendants presented in this chapter relies on already published scholarly and journal articles (Boston 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Karpieszuk 2011; Osiński 2010). In this regard, the chapter neither reveals new information about Browne derived from primary sources nor does it discuss contradictions one may notice in them; this has recently been initiated by the American sociologist and media scholar Nicholas Boston (2020d). At the same time, Boston's other works (2018, 2021) provide further analysis of the (mis)articulations at the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality that may present a challenge to the way Ali has been represented in media discourses and visual culture.

A newcomer who comes back

Browne was born in 1895 in Lagos to Nigerian parents. After some time spent in the UK and the Free City of Danzig, he moved to Poland in 1922, where he lived for more than 30 years, working mostly as a jazz musician. Before the Second World War, he married a Polish woman who gave birth to their two sons in the late 1920s, though the couple probably separated soon afterwards. His (ex-)wife and children escaped German-occupied Poland in the autumn of 1939, but he is believed to have taken part in the defence of Warsaw in 1939 as a volunteer soldier and later, under the codename of Ali, as a combatant in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. He survived the war and decided to stay in communist Poland. He married another Polish woman in 1952 or 1953, and in 1956 they immigrated together to France and then to the United Kingdom, where their daughter was born in 1959. After Browne left Poland, he was almost totally forgotten in Warsaw's public memory for many decades. He died in London in 1976, but it was only a few years ago that his grave was found by right-wing Polish activists devoted to the renovation of the tombs of Polish soldiers buried in the UK (E.J. 2017).

Ali's posthumous return to Poland and Warsaw, in particular, started in 2009. When Dr. Zbigniew Osiński from the MPW was undertaking research for a biographical lexicon of the uprising insurgents (MPW n.d.), he came across Browne's application card for the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Karpieszuk 2011), a Polish state-led monopolistic union of veterans and victims of the Second World War (see Wawrzyniak 2015). The document, in which Ali described his involvement in the Warsaw Uprising, was dated 1949, the year when the Union was formed but also the year when the fiercest Stalinist repressions directed at the former soldiers of the Home Army began in Poland. This coincidence convinced Osiński that Browne's self-description on the Union application form was historically reliable. As he argued in an article titled 'Szeregowiec Ali' [Private Ali] published in 2011 in the leading Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 'in 1949, those who claimed

they took part in the Uprising could not have expected any benefits. Just the opposite' (Karpieszuk 2011, 9).

Motivated by this accidental archival find, Osiński continued his investigation, looking for other traces of Warsaw's long-forgotten Afro-diasporic combatant. Osiński disseminated the results of his research in a short article (2010) that appeared in an edited volume devoted to the history of the African diaspora in Warsaw. The volume was published by the Afryka Inaczej [Africa another way] Foundation, an NGO established in Warsaw by Mamadou Diouf, a musician, journalist and social activist of Senegalese descent living in Poland since the early 1980s. Interestingly, Diouf, the volume's co-editor, returned to the subject of Ali's involvement in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising by releasing his own song 'Agbola#44' in November 2020 (Diouf 2020).

Since the publication of Osiński's article, the story of the 'Warsaw insurgent from Nigeria' has been enthusiastically covered by countless broadsheets and tabloids of various political persuasions with a local or national readership. Regrettably, these articles all share a neo-colonial oppressive language degrading Ali to the status of merely another bizarre 'object' found in the cabinet of curiosities ('a sensation', 'a revelation'). Even now, more than ten years since the initial 'discovery', samples of such exoticizing approaches may be found in the press. For instance, in an article in *Polska: The Times* newspaper (Strzyga 2019), Ali is described as 'the most exotic Warsaw insurgent' whose 'colourful fate is still waiting for an thorough presentation'. 'Colourful fate', an idiom used to express the idea of a rich, interesting life—even when stripped of its potentially racist meaning—still sounds awkward, as a tool to transform Browne's life story into an Orientalized adventure attractive to readers.

Ali depicted and displayed

Osiński's academic article, as well as early media coverage of the topic, inspired Warsaw-based visual artist Karol Radziszewski to include an image of Ali in a mural depicting Warsaw insurgents that was commissioned in 2009 by the MPW (Dubrowska 2017). Ultimately, this project was rejected and therefore never implemented, but Radziszewski reused the concept in his other works. In 2016, he presented a series of paintings called *Ali* (Radziszewski n.d.) at the BWA Warszawa Gallery (the BWA). These consisted of various imaginary, non-realistic portraits of Browne. Instead of contemporary acts of performance such as murals, Radziszewski chose the traditional form of oil painting and a Picassoesque style of expression, in order to rewrite history by suggesting to audiences that representations of Ali should have been familiar to them for years. As Radziszewski explained,

I used the traditional medium of painting because this is my subversive strategy of rewriting history ... When you see paintings on canvas, it

seems to you that they have always existed in Polish history. They are associated with Picasso, with the 1940s and 1950s. People remember something, but they don't know exactly where they have seen it. After three years they no longer remember which year [the paintings] came from, and after five years it seems to them that these paintings had been created a long time ago. Because they should have been created then. This is a rewriting backwards [of history].

(Dubrowska 2017)

Such a strategy may be identified as a retroactive re-emergence, as Radziszewski intended to work on 'a lost opportunity from the past that returns to offer itself for creating alternative futures' (Knudsen 2019) by creating imaginary versions of (art) history through interventions into technique and style. For Radziszewski, it was important to create an intense symbol that could intervene from a minority and migrant perspective in order to rewrite the official history of a 'completely white, Catholic, homogenous' Polish society (Dubrowska 2017). Therefore, in several of his representations of Browne, Radziszewski created a link between Polish political symbolism of the Second World War and a consciously applied postcolonial perspective, re-using Picasso's manner of viewing Africa, as Picasso was for him 'the first to in some sense appropriate African art, while also introducing it into the art mainstream' (Dubrowska 2017).

Aside from such 'classical' oil paintings, Radziszewski also marked the occasion of the BWA exhibition by executing a charcoal sketch of a fantastical half-man, half-fish he called *Syren* on one of the gallery's walls, thereby repeating, and rewriting, a gesture Pablo Picasso had made during his visit to Warsaw in 1948 on his way back from Wrocław, where he took part in the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace. At that time, Picasso sketched in charcoal the Warsaw mermaid (known as *Syrena*, the feminine form of *Syren*, which is a masculine neologism) on a wall in a private apartment located in one of the then newly erected block of flats. This half-woman, half-fish is depicted on the city's coat of arms and, according to local folk tales, she lived (or lives) in the River Vistula, from where she took (takes) care of the city (see Wrońska and Rasmus-Zgorzelska 2020).

Picasso's mermaid brandished a hammer instead of her original heraldic sword to underline that when a war is over, a period of peace needs new heroes: in this case, workers instead of soldiers, which was particularly true for a communist state fiercely committed to restoring the city from its wartime ruin and to 'the Fight for Peace'. Radziszewski's *Syren* modifies the well-established image of the Warsaw mermaid and its Picassian embodiment: the head of a fictional white woman is replaced by the head of a historical black man—Ali, who happened to be a soldier. The figure has gained the face of a famous insurgent, but has retained his non-military attribute, still holding a hammer in his hand, though in this case the tool symbolizes a postulated 'reconstruction of dialogue' (Dubrowska 2017).

In March 2017, the *Syren* was one of the artworks exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (the MSN) at a temporary exhibition titled *Syrena herbem twym zwodnicza* (The beguiling siren is the crest) that inaugurated the museum's new location on the banks of the River Vistula (MSN 2017). By taking an expansive, multitasking approach, this exhibition sought to literally bring the museum closer to (becoming) the mermaid's home, while also entering into a dialogue with Warsaw's local identity symbol and discussing global struggles with hybridity and awkwardness that have been using the images of mermaids in the modern and contemporary visual arts. This was also a significant development in the revival of Ali's visibility, for it was the first time that his image had been publicly presented in Warsaw's urban space outside museums and galleries. The exhibition was advertised by a large-scale mural painted next to Warsaw's central Metro underground station, which depicted, among other works, Picasso's mermaid and Radziszewski's *Syren* (see Figure 5.1).

The captions accompanying both reproductions provided explicit explanations of the direction of inspirations between these two artists and confirmed the presence of the Ali's face on the sketch of *Syren*. Eight years after Osiński had started research on Ali at the MPW and the same number of years after the project that included Radziszewski's mural featuring an image of Ali had been rejected by the same museum, Ali became visible in the cityscape for the very first time in his afterlife.

Ali at the museum

A single entry in the online lexicon of insurgents available on the MPW website still remains one of the main secondary sources on Browne (MPW n.d.). However, the museum has neither incorporated Browne's life story nor any image of him into the narrative of its permanent exhibition. The exhibition's content has not been updated since its opening in 2004, five years before Ali re-emerged in Warsaw's urban memory. The MPW exhibition, frequented by more than half a million visitors per year and considered the most popular representation of the 1944 Uprising in the Polish public history sector, remains therefore silent about Browne's life story.

The first institution, and the only one so far, that has referred to Ali in its permanent exhibition and included Radziszewski's representations of him is the Museum of Warsaw. Two of Radziszewski's paintings from the *Ali* series were purchased by the museum in 2015 and 2017: one depicting a young black man with a bare chest against a white and red background resembling the Polish national flag (see Figure 5.2) and another showing a young black man dressed in a Polish insurgent army uniform (see Figure 5.3).

The acquisition of these portraits provoked a dialogue between the aims of Radziszewski's own memory activism and the curatorial strategy developed at that time at the museum. It took place when the Museum of Warsaw was employing a comprehensive, multilayered transformation that resulted

Figure 5.1 Pablo Picasso's Warsaw mermaid and Karol Radziszewski's *Syren*, reproductions next to Warsaw's central Metro underground station, as part of a large-scale mural advertisement of the *Syrena herbem twym zwodnicza* (*The beguiling siren is the crest*) exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, March 2017.

Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

from the implementation of the concept of *Things of Warsaw* as a tool for the reassessment of the rich museum collections (ca. 300,000 objects) and a framework for designing a new core exhibition, purposefully devoted to 'extraordinary stories of ordinary things' (see Bukowiecki 2019, 19). The *Things of Warsaw* exhibition is divided into 21 separately designed thematic rooms that contain more than 7,000 original historical objects of various value, material and function. All of them come from the museum's collections and are displayed as material remnants, silent witnesses to and important participants in the city's multi-threaded past (MW 2018; Trybuś 2017).

In May 2017, the first eight thematic rooms of the exhibition were opened to the public, including the Room of Portraits, co-curated by Paweł Ignaczak and Magdalena Wróblewska. As the exhibition catalogue explains, the portraits presented there 'show Varsovians—by birth or by choice—who played a significant role in the city's history', representing 'four essential groups of images in the Museum collection: members of the authorities, servicemen, representatives of different professions and the intelligentsia, as well as women' (Ignaczak and Wróblewska 2017, 55). One of the highlights of this room—and the only new acquisition displayed there—was the aforementioned Radziszewski's cubist painting of a bare-chested Ali. It was hung centrally and surrounded by representations of other fighters from the

Figure 5.2 Karol Radziszewski's 2015 portrait depicting a bare-chested August Agboola Browne, code-named Ali, participant of the Warsaw Uprising, displayed in the Room of Portraits at the Museum of Warsaw between May 2017 and July 2019.

Courtesy of Ewelina Lach, 2017.

city's history, white men from various historical epochs solemnly dressed in uniform. In August 2019, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, Browne's (half-)naked portrait was replaced by the other one from the series acquired by the museum. In the second painting, Ali is wearing a uniform much like the other men whose portraits hang on the wall.

Members of the museum's curatorial team shared various opinions on the meaning of displaying these two portraits of Ali. On the one hand, as hinted by some curators, the bare-chested Ali provoked a genuinely decolonial and masculinity-critical viewpoint by deconstructing the military roles of the other men in uniforms presented in the Room of Portraits. Various contrasts strengthened this impression: Ali's nakedness and sexuality was in conflict with the repressed bodies in tight clothes that surrounded him, his blackness—with the whiteness of the other depicted soldiers and the bright white-and-red colours of the Polish flag behind him—with the dark or grey backgrounds of other portraits. On the other hand, some curators saw this setting as reproducing, rather than reversing, colonial and racist images. Without a uniform, Ali was stripped of his dignity and this problem could only have been redressed by literally re-dressing his portrait.

The case of Ali's portraits at the Museum of Warsaw shows how the thoughtful purchase of contemporary artworks for the museum's collections could change the way an exhibition tells stories about the city's difficult pasts,

Figure 5.3 Karol Radziszewski's 2017 uniformed portrait of Ali, displayed since 1 August 2019 in the Room of Portraits at the Museum of Warsaw.

Photo by author.

by using new perspectives proposed by an artist, subsequently supplemented and altered by museum curators. Radziszewski's portraits of Ali—so seemingly different from other paintings displayed in the Room of Portraits and therefore likely to attract visitors' gazes—helped the museum propose a clever counterbalance to the recently emerging Polish nationalistic narrative on the memory of the Warsaw Uprising, to critically engage with the collection of portraits stored in the museum and, last but not least, to uncover hidden entanglements between the city's wartime past and the (post)colonial imaginary. At the same time, both paintings evoked a pluriversity of interpretations among the museum's visitors. For many, Ali has become a symbol of Polish patriotism quite conventionally related to a narrative of national victimhood, albeit widened to accommodate a Polish–Nigerian migrant. For others, his representation next to portraits of servicemen from the museum collections questions the well-established patterns of collective memory of a white and homogenous Polish society and challenges its military idioms.

Ali in the city

When Radziszewski was implementing his artistic visions in cooperation with consecutive Warsaw museums and galleries, both the city authorities and official representatives of the 1944 insurgents remained silent about Ali.

Only the Freedom and Peace Foundation, an NGO that was established in 2010 but shared a name, values and its membership with the activist anti-communist Freedom and Peace Movement from the 1980s, encouraged the Warsaw City Hall to erect a permanent memorial to Ali in the city's public space. This bottom-up initiative funded by individual donors and supported by the media (Kozubal 2018a, 2018b, 2019) involved consultations with many institutions, both local and national, including the district and municipal administration, the MPW, the Warsaw Historical Monuments Conservation Office and Poland's Institute of National Remembrance.

Ali's monument was one of the biggest initiatives undertaken by the Freedom and Peace Foundation in recent years. Why did they choose Ali as a hero of their memory activism? Dariusz Zalewski, sociologist and activist from the Foundation who initiated this process and authored the inscription placed on the memorial, explains that the idea to honour Browne in Warsaw came to him by accident, or as coincidence, in November 2017, when, on the one hand, the spokesperson of Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Polish Youth), far-right ultranationalist Polish youth organization, claimed that a black man cannot be a Pole, while, on the other, the activists of a radical right-wing portal *Idź pod prąd* (Go against the tide) found and cleaned the gravestone of Browne in London's Hampstead Cemetery.

Only in December 2017 did Zalewski meet Zbigniew Osiński from the MPW and ask his director for a letter of recommendation for the idea of memorializing Ali in Warsaw's public space, so as to start initial talks on that topic with the Warsaw city authorities in January 2018. Although both the museum director and all the policymakers and city hall officers were much in favour of the concept, it took more than a year and a half to implement it, mostly due to discussions on the form and place of the commemoration, as well as a miscommunication between the City Hall offices.

The project evolved from the idea of a commemorative plaque near the Aquarium jazz club on Herbert Hoover Square in a historical area of the city (to mark that Ali was a jazz musician in his civilian life) into a free-standing stone monolith with inscriptions placed at the intersection of Stefan 'Wiech' Wiechecki Passage and Chmielna Street; two important pedestrian shopping streets in the contemporary city centre, but also close to the operational location of the 'Iwo' Battalion in which Browne is believed to have been serving during the Warsaw Uprising. The final design of the memorial and its execution was commissioned by the Foundation, with the approval of the city authorities. The monument was unveiled during an official ceremony that took place with the participation of local policy makers and former Warsaw insurgents on 2 August 2019, just one day after the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising.

Once completed, the monolith was claimed by members of Warsaw's African diaspora as their own site of memory, too. On 1 August 2020, the Nigerian–Polish community organized a celebration of the 76th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising at the monument in order to

commemorate Browne's involvement in the Polish resistance during the Second World War. A few hours later at the same spot, artist and activist Mamadou Diouf performed on djembe and gave a speech on Ali's legacy as part of a commemorative event hosted by the Freedom and Peace Foundation (FPF 2020). In turn, photos depicting Ali's Warsaw memorial feature in a video clip accompanying Diouf's song 'Agbola#44' published on the artist's YouTube page (Diouf 2020).

In terms of form, the monument differs from Radziszewski's portraits in almost every respect (Figure 5.4). Its front features a handmade engraving of a photograph of Browne in his forties or fifties by a sculptor and engraver Lucjan Trzebiatowski. Far from being uniformed or bare-chested, he is dressed in a civilian evening suit, white shirt and bow tie, producing an image that, according to Zalewski, fits the story of the lifestyle and personality of Browne, known for his elegance and charm. Instead of the symbolic visual shortcut characteristic of Radziszewski's artworks, the memorial provides a bilingual Polish–English description: 'In honor of Augustine Agboola Browne, nom de guerre Ali, a jazz musician and participant in the Warsaw uprising of African origin. Poland was the country he chose to live in'. Finally, while Radziszewski's portraits are conspicuous by their size, provocative in form and strong in message, the commemorative monolith seems to be humble, restrained and unobtrusive—almost invisible to those who do not know it stands there. The monument's modest size makes it hard to believe how many people involved in its creation were mentioned in the official speeches accompanying its unveiling, a ceremony attended by prominent figures such as the Mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski.

Despite essential differences in the ways Browne is depicted in the portraits purchased by the museum and on the memorial in the street, the values derived from his life story are in both cases practically the same. During his speech, Trzaskowski claimed:

Warsaw has always been open and tolerant. Many interesting people have come here—and it is the same today. Today, Warsaw is just as open to everyone who wants to live in Warsaw; it is an open and tolerant city—and August Browne is a symbol of this.... I am very glad that in the name of tolerance and recognition of everyone who stands shoulder to shoulder with Poles, with Warsaw residents, in the fight for freedom, for someone who deserves to be remembered and deserves our warm thoughts, ... today we can unveil this stone, unveil this little obelisk, symbolic in a sense. Let it become a symbol of an open, tolerant, smiling Warsaw. This is how it always has been, this is how it was in the interwar period, and this is how it is today and let it always be so.

(FPF 2019)

Surprisingly, given that the message was so consistent, or at least complementary, to the one that had been proposed by Radziszewski and promoted by

Figure 5.4 The commemorative monolith of August Agboola Browne at the intersection of Stefan 'Wiech' Wiechecki Passage and Chmielna Street, Warsaw.

Photo by Adrian Grycuk, 2019. Image source: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_Agbola_O%E2%80%99Brown#/media/Plik:Upami%C4%99tnienie_August_Agbola_Browne_w_Warszawie.jpg (CC BY-SA 3.0 pl).

the Museum of Warsaw, there was not a single word at the ceremony that at the very same time the bare-chested Ali was being replaced by the uniformed one at the museum's core exhibition.

Conclusions: what is Ali used for?

It seems that the figure of Ali functions separately in the fields of historical research (for which the MPW is responsible), artistic expression (Radziszewski's artworks presented permanently at the Museum of Warsaw and temporarily at the BWA and the MSN) and public remembrance (an NGO initiative supported by the city authorities). The multiple afterlives of Ali run in parallel to each other and differ from one another in terms of the means of expressions and stakeholders involved, but in the final reckoning they are structurally similar to each other. Ali is a role model of everything a citizen or a hero can be, whether he is regarded as a 'Varsovian by choice' or a foreigner who found his new home in Warsaw, and at a time of great trial,

was ready to sacrifice himself for his second homeland and hometown. His life story is used for retroactive wishful thinking on the culturally diverse open-minded Warsaw of the past. Such thinking is directed against today's forms of racism and primordialism in the Polish social imaginary and, therefore, may promote tolerance and hospitality in the society of the future. However, such an approach also carries the risk of fuelling Polish complacency and repression of the past (and present) intolerance towards and violence against minorities and migrants. Ali has become a strong, affirmative symbol that, however, demands very little indeed by way of both the audience reaction and interpretation. So little is known about Browne himself and his life choices, that it allows readers of his image to fill it with their own beliefs, hopes and values. As Boston noticed, Browne's 'war service is honoured by conservatives and progressives alike to symbolise the Poland of today' (2020c). Unfortunately, this process sometimes gives rise to binary thinking and oppressive wording, despite the efforts of artists, curators and memory activists to present Ali as 'not only a proud symbol of Poland's past, but [also] a promising model for its present and future' (Boston 2020b).

Multiple images and stories of Ali are used as a tool for decolonizing the collective memory in Warsaw, by decentring the well-established historical narratives or canons of representation, and lending visibility to once invisible minorities. Such decentring of critical endeavours is the first step towards a more decolonial future. To decolonize Ali himself we need to stop treating his spectres as objects and should allow them to have their own subjectivity, so as to let them speak with their own voices. Including Browne in the national regimes of collective memory should denormalize and change them, rather than hypervisualize him or compartmentalize him in a section of historical curiosities. The first step to achieving this would be to introduce a more critical attitude to assess Browne's unique life story. The revival of an image of insurgent Ali provokes, on the one hand, the question of whether and, if so, how foreigners have to prove their heroism and dedication to their second homeland in order to become fully acknowledged members of the community. On the other hand, Ali as a subject takes his investigators on a journey to uncharted territories, where any categories used to describe his life story might at once lead the way and be misleading. Ali's spectres come back to remind us that (pre-war) Poland happened to be 'the country he chose to live in' once, but also that for some reason (post-war communist) Poland was the country he decided to leave.

Note

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All translations from Polish are my own unless otherwise noted.

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