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Book Reviews

Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally (editors), *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018). pp. 260.

Thabisile Griffin

Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally's *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements* sets out to explore the relationships between informal knowledge, learning, and social change, with an emphasis on lesser known experiences within the historical tradition.¹ The book's essays are organized into four sections: engaging with activist movement archives, learning and teaching militant histories, lessons from liberatory and anti-imperialist struggles and finally, learning from student/education struggles. As scholars tend to get caught up in theoretical ideations of freedom, this collection of essays presents a timely meditation on applied knowledge.

The organization and content of this text offers the first lesson—a determination to include scholarship from people outside of the academy, contending against the professionalization and neo-liberal cooptation of third world studies. Throughout the text there is also an imperative to learn from one of the most persistent and dynamic struggle sites of our generation—South Africa. Six of the fourteen chapters are on South African organizing, archives, literature and education. Contributors also explore connections and ideas from places including the UK, Turtle Island, Iran, Argentina, Palestine and the U.S. Individually, the essays succeed in uncovering a deeper knowledge on a particular social movement, but collectively, the pieces demand a critical awareness and knowledge of each other. The very format of this project suggests we develop and maintain an international framework, a global reckoning. It is in the potential of this grounding, based on experience and study, that make this collection abundant with possibility.

Early on, the “activist archive” is introduced as the informal preservation of materials utilized during social movements, which has less to do with countering the traditional academic archive, but instead works to support people and experiences that have long been considered invalid. Organizations like the Alexander Defense Committee of Women in South Africa,² with a strong history of women writing and recording the South African liberation movement, reflect how this process is part of the struggle itself.

We are warned on the danger of spotlighting singular individuals as representatives of social movements, and how precise the process of creating and protecting activist archives must be, in cases of the Alexander Defense Committee as well as in David Johnson's discussion on South African biographies slipping into tools of post-apartheid nationalism.³ Johnson warns us not to idolize a singular people in archiving a history. A growing securitization of resistance movements also contributes to this urgency for protected narratives—evident by the pushback against student movements in Iran dating back to the 1930s. Mahdi Ganjavi and Shahrzad Mojab refer to this particular process as the “Islamisation of collective memory,” the ideological and selective process of the regime archiving the Iranian student movement to overemphasize Islamic tendencies.⁴ Writing, recording and protecting our own narratives is posed as a collective responsibility.

The intimacy in these narratives offer a critical honesty that encourages dialectical discussions and reconfigurations of strategy. Trevor Nqwane writes how obscured negative aspects of anti-apartheid struggle—the idealization of militarism, the use of compulsion and violence as a mobilizing tool⁵—can lead to generative discussions. The debates that come from uncovering contradictions and harms of past organizing can be used as a method for envisioning better forms of justice. This text makes clear there is monumental significance in writing and archiving personal organizing experiences.

The danger of negotiated compromises with the state also appears as a theme throughout several essays, most striking in Akram Salhab's piece “The Legacy of the Palestinian Revolution: Reviving Organising For the Next Generation.” Since the Oslo Accords of 1993 (a set of agreements between the Israeli state and the Palestinian Liberation Organization), the role of political factions has dramatically changed. Salhab calls one effect of these agreements the “NGOisation” of the Palestinian political arena, a shift that reflected the priorities of foreign donors rather than the needs of Palestinians,⁶ and ultimately resulted in campaigns led by unrepresentative spokespeople incapable of articulating the reality of the masses of people.

The examples brought forth under various degrees of suppression—from Israeli apartheid, to neoliberal universities, to the passing of the Extension of University Education Act of 1959

that classified students in accordance to racially defined apartheid labels, all demonstrated the necessity to not only push back against unjust institutions and legislation, but envision and create our own structures of learning. A critical gap this compilation could have explored is the informal archives in the digital age, and the limitations of having organizational material so publicly available and vulnerable to private and state surveillance. However, the explicit lesson these essays do offer is sufficient, which is the unique and advantageous position we hold in this period. Our historical examples still go untapped in much of the activism today, although the context and lessons of the past are crucial. We have a robust informal archive to exhaust — a responsibility and privilege that should not be taken lightly. It is our collective imperative to take the defeats, limitations and contradictions, and brainstorm beyond them to actualize the world we so desperately need.

Notes

¹ Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally, *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

