History's schools

Past struggles and present realities

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> *Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language*.
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> (Marx 1974, 149)

In her afterword to the 45th anniversary edition of Walter Rodney's *The Groundings with my Brothers*, Jamaican social historian Verene Shepherd (2014) noted:

> [m]aybe policy-makers are afraid of the philosophy that History prepares us for activism; that History is a way of ordering knowledge which could become an active part of the consciousness of the uncertified [not the uneducated] mass of ordinary people and could be used by all as an instrument of social change.
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> (66)

This collection explores some of the ways in which organisers, educators and activists in organisations and movements struggling for progressive social change can and do critically engage with historical materials and ideas from earlier periods of organising for their use in political education and struggle today. As we write this chapter, we are aware that had he not been assassinated in 1980, Rodney, the Guyanese historian, revolutionary and popular educator might have turned 75 in 2017. Remembering Rodney, and his commitments to *groundings* – sitting down with poor and working class people in their communities on the margins of Jamaica and other societies, sharing stories about their life experiences, discussing politics and African history, generating knowledge, engaging in mutual learning, solidarity, movement and action – reminds us of the many and varied important historical and contemporary processes across the world in which

ordinary people come together, engage each other, learn from each other, produce knowledge and act together.

Political activism, popular education, organising and the study of history were inseparable in Walter Rodney's life and work. In that spirit, by exploring how activists actively participate in constructing critical histories, analyses of power and injustice, and alternative visions of social change by political engagement with historical materials, experiences and ideas, this book aims to advance understandings about relationships between informal learning, knowledge and social change. Particular emphasis is placed on experiences which have not been systematically recorded, disseminated and shared. The collection presents some of the ways that activists retrieve and construct 'useful' challenging histories, through assembling and critically engaging with independent (often informal) archives, oral histories and historical movement debates. It examines how they develop and employ such historical resources and understandings in contemporary struggles, producing knowledge in the service of social transformation.

This chapter provides an overview of the book's themes, introducing key conceptual, practical and theoretical considerations concerning activist engagements with historical debates and materials from within earlier movements. We draw from radical adult education scholarship and knowledge produced by activists to help frame the threads that run through the book about learning, knowledge production and teaching history in social movements and organising milieus.

In 1968, Rodney was expelled from Jamaica after being fired from his position as a history lecturer at the University of the West Indies, seen as subversive and a threat to the government because of his work with the country's poor. That same year, the original version of the celebrated *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970) – whom Brazil's military government viewed similarly for his education work with the poor – was published in Portuguese. While trained as a historian, Rodney's life reminds us of the power of approaches to education and knowledge that emerge from political commitment, taking history seriously in a quest for strategies and tactics, ideas and actions needed for liberation. Throughout the world, whether documented or not in accounts considered to be authoritative, there have been many examples of innovative and emergent pedagogies and praxis which develop as people come together to struggle against exploitation and oppression. As the late South African scholar-revolutionary, political prisoner and educationist Neville Alexander recalled (Villa-Vicencio 1996, 13) about the 'University of Robben Island' on the process of political prisoners educating themselves during the decade he was jailed there:

> We taught one another what we knew, discovering each other's resourcefulness. We also learned how people with little or no formal education could not only themselves participate in education programmes but actually teach others a range of different insights and skills. The "University of Robben Island" was one of the best universities in the country; it also showed me that you don't need professors.

In keeping with the sentiment of Alexander's reflection, as the chapters in this collection suggest, there are rich traditions of critical historical work within social

movements in many parts of the world, whether or not those who commit to doing this are formally recognised as historians in the conventional sense.

Activism, social movement learning and knowledge production

The educative role of social movements and social and political activism is often overlooked within adult education and social movement scholarship. Movements are not only significant sites of social and political action, but also important, albeit contested and contradictory, terrains of learning and knowledge production. Relatively few scholars have generated the "holistic and materialist analyses of learning in particular sites and struggles" (6) that Foley (1999) calls for in order to avoid the abstract and culturalist trends he critiques in much radical adult education literature. A strand of critical adult education theory (Youngman 1986; Foley 1999; Allman 2010; Holst 2002; Scandrett 2012; Carpenter and Mojab 2012 and 2017; Boughton 2013; Choudry 2015) has sought to theorise adult learning informed by historical materialism by attending to relationships of education and learning, community practice and collective/emancipatory struggles. Furthermore, we believe that activist research, education and action are dialectically related. This perspective challenges the fragmentation of activities into neatly compartmentalised categories like research, education and organising (Choudry 2015).

The importance of spaces for collective action, learning and reflection are crucial, as is openness to valuing processes of informal and non-formal learning and knowledge produced from within people's everyday experience. British socialist historian and activist E. P. Thompson (1963) warned of the "enormous condescension of posterity" (12), when writing about how patronising and dismissive so many historians were when dealing with working class history, committed as he was to foregrounding the importance of working class people as political agents, thinkers and knowledge producers. In a similar vein, Jonathan Rose (2001) revealingly contrasted "the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts" with the "pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy" (4). Elsewhere (Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Vally et al., 2013; Choudry 2015), we have argued that activist intellectual work requires practices and strategies grounded in critical (including self-critical) historical perspectives as well as emerging ideas which arise from engagement in current struggles. Thus, our focus on activist knowledge, learning and history explored in this collection foregrounds the ideas, insights and visions produced by people collectively working for social, economic and political change and reflecting on their experiences and what has preceded them. This is knowledge about systems of power and exploitation developed as people find themselves in confrontation with states and capital. This book also foregrounds the existence of rich, often underexplored, archives and publications of earlier generations of movements (Vally et al., 2013; Ramamurthy 2013; Sears 2014), as well as the conscious production of understandings that challenge dominant or hegemonic 'common-sense' within, and about, various struggles.

As a number of radical adult education scholars have noted, the intellectual/educational aspects of organising for change include intentional, explicit, programmatic educational activities within activist and social movement spaces, as

well as multiple forms of incidental, informal learning that are not always obviously linked to learning, embedded as they are in a host of activities – the often mundane but vital tasks in the hard grind of organising work. Scandrett's (2012) approach to theorising learning and the educative aspects of social movements highlight the importance of attending to the dynamics between more structured processes and informal and/or incidental learning and knowledge production.

We are inspired by the work of critically engaged historians (for example, Kelley 2002; Ramnath 2011; Austin 2013; Benson 2015; Nieftagodien 2015) and sociologists (Kinsman and Gentile 2010; Sears 2014), and some political and intellectual biographies. For example, Bunce and Field's (2014) book about the late Black British activist Darcus Howe uses his life as a framework to illuminate the history of Black Power in Britain. All of these works seek to uncover, document and review knowledge from below. Such knowledge is overlooked by dominant treatments of historical social struggles. We look at this history with an eye to its relevance and use for contemporary organising and radical politics. Historians linked to movements, in contrast to neoliberalism's ahistorical denialism, can make the case for history itself – "for the ways current distributions of power, privilege, and resources emerge from and are inseparable from the past" – and suggest that the struggle for reparations and redress following slavery, colonialism and apartheid "are not 'history' as surmounted, transcended past but elements of a past-haunted present" (Kramer 2017, n.p.). Besides radical history, our collection also builds on critical social movement scholarship (Bevington and Dixon 2005; Mathew 2005; Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Choudry 2015), contending that significant and under-researched conceptual resources and theoretical contributions emerge from people's concrete engagement in social struggles that may challenge scholarly understandings of social change.

A significant current that runs through the intellectual work within many movements and which takes multiple forms is comprised of efforts to recover useful histories, oral history, forgotten archives and history from below. Popular education resources also make accessible hidden histories of struggle, and tools for understanding the contingent – what might have led up to particular conditions at particular moments. This collection explores and critically engages with the democratic significance of activist knowledge through developing popular education tools, documenting histories of struggles and informal ways in which political education is passed across generations of activists. Some authors reflect on pedagogical issues and approaches which seek to draw upon important ideas and debates found within activist archives (organised or informal), from oral histories and from other critical/dialectical engagements with history. In doing so, we engage with ways in which organisers and activists try to develop context-specific, locally relevant ways to connect historical movement knowledge with contemporary organising. In other chapters, authors explore the potential that exists in concrete organising contexts to do so. How, this book asks, echoing the title of Andrew Flinn's contribution, have people attempted to make history of their struggle part of the struggle itself? And, if not, how could they do so?

The histories of people's struggles for change can themselves be repositories of ideas, debates and practices that can offer invaluable conceptual and practical

resources for today's organising. They often reveal the nuts and bolts of how people have collectively organised and operated. The extent to which organisers and activists in contemporary social movements, political organisations, community and popular struggles engage with earlier movement histories, memories and ideas in the course of their organising ranges widely. Organisers and movements are often focused on effecting immediate change rather than preserving records or drawing lessons about and from their activities for the next generation. Resource constraints and other competing priorities mean that activists/movements are not always able to focus on preserving their own histories, or how best to pass on and critically engage with them. As one of the contributors to this collection, Anandi Ramamurthy (2006) notes elsewhere, such records are destroyed due to multiple reasons including the breakup of organisations, the disillusionment of participants who see the disintegration of their dreams or through practical circumstances in which records are lost due to factors such as the relocation of offices and residences. In many contexts, state repression has often been a factor in the creation, maintenance or destruction and loss of such materials (see Williams and Wallach 2006, on South Africa, for example).

Colonial plunder and erasure have also played a significant role in attempts to exert control over knowledge and the writing of history in many instances (Trouillot 1995; Cobain 2016; Sleiman 2016). An egregious example of how a ruling state loots the colonised's archives and treasures and controls them in its colonial archives – "erasing them from the public sphere by repressive means, censor[ing] and restrict[ing] their exposure and use, alter[ing] their original identity, regulat[ing] their contents, and subjugat[ing] them to colonizer's rules, laws and terminology" (Sela 2017, 1) – is the case of Israel. As Sleiman (2016, 45–46) contends, in the case of Israel's attacks against, and eventual 1982 seizure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Research Centre Archive, "[t]he theft of the archive indicates that the very keeping of such records is considered an additional threat posed by the movement; this threat exists not on the physical battlefield, but on the narrative one". Akram Salhab's chapter on Palestine in this volume, and an important recently launched online resource, *The Palestinian Revolution* (n.d.), curated and edited by Palestinian scholars Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq Takriti, reflect specific difficulties of recovering ideas and strategies from earlier phases of struggle for the Palestinian people today in this historical and ongoing context of Israeli colonialism. Venne and Watson's chapter also contends with the dynamics of colonial power relations, whether through hegemonic official state, intergovernmental or non-governmental accounts, narratives and perspectives in their work for Indigenous Peoples' struggles for self-determination.

The US historian, lawyer and activist Staughton Lynd (2014, 148) suggests that the practice of 'history from below' could

> become a way of nurturing community among persons sharing the same or similar experiences. The exchange of ideas about the past could serve as rituals of renewed affirmation concerning the future. But in contrast to patriotic rituals the meaning of which has been fixed in advance, this sort of sharing would be flexible and would encompass new reflections at each repetition.

In highlighting such an approach to history, broadly speaking, we are very aware that histories from below – and those which claim to be – can be fraught with contradictions, silences, omissions, distortions and absences in similar ways to official histories, just as learning and knowledge produced in activist milieus can sometimes replicate rather than disrupt dominant power relations. As Koni Benson notes, histories of struggles are themselves terrains of struggles over history, where some (in this case, women activists') perspectives "were written off, before they were even written" (2015, 387). Equally, it must be stated that by no means do we suggest that a critical appreciation of history and historical knowledge is present in all forms of activism.

This collection, then, brings together radical adult education and historical theoretical frameworks to explicitly examine the knowledge production, learning and politics involved in processes of retrieving and critically engaging with movement histories and developing activist archives, and further, in ways which put them into dialogue with contemporary activism. Six chapters deal with South Africa's rich struggle history, reflecting its breadth and diversity of progressive social movements, while the remainder relates to struggles in other parts of the world. This book seeks to enrich, broaden and challenge dominant understandings about how and where education, learning and knowledge production occur. In documenting these practices, and bringing them into dialogue with each other, it will advance critical understandings about learning, knowledge production and social movements by: 1) exploring relationships between contemporary activist/social movement knowledge and independent, community-based archival and historical resources; 2) examining the theoretical and practical implications of the intellectual work of activism in order to better understand non-formal and informal learning and social change and 3) highlighting approaches to retrieve, connect and bring movement/activist knowledge from the past into dialogue with the collective present, in order to inform future change and facilitate intergenerational learning.

Excavating, extracting, engaging and educating

In their editorial in the *History Workshop Journal*, Sally Alexander, Bill Schwarz and Andrew Whitehead (2017) write: "If history is a way of knowing the world which can work as an antidote to catastrophic thought then there may be virtue in the fact that – most often – historical knowledge necessarily moves slowly. It is slow thought" (2).

Walter Rodney's life, his scholarship and struggles which brought together theory and practice also reminds us of the transnational nature of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles and exchange of ideas long before the Internet era, and which dispute the claims that only now are movements and ideas connecting up because of the reach and speed of digital technology. Often forced to find work and an income in different places after governments in Jamaica and Guyana revoked his university appointments, from Georgetown, Guyana to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania; Montreal to London, Rodney drew from his experiences, encounters and immersion in a range of struggles and liberation movements, engaging in local

politics and support for efforts of liberation struggles – and committing to understand and analyse the historical context in which people lived and struggled. In assembling this collection, we take heed of David Featherstone's (2012) insistence upon the need to challenge and circumvent "the logics of uneven historical production that have shaped histories and geographies" (63). We also note the long histories of insurgent solidarities, internationalisms and 'old school' ways of sharing radical ideas and knowledge under the noses of the powerful, as well as contending with sometimes dominant and problematic power relations within social movements themselves.

Moreover, at a time when there is understandable critical concern at the further narrowing of political and economic horizons of possibility, what role can radical history play in fueling movements for change, illuminating militant visions, understandings and imaginations which cut through a convenient state of social amnesia and offer us different ways of thinking and living? Writing shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration, US historian Paul Kramer (2017, n.p.) asked: "What use is history at a time like this? Specifically, what if any distinct role should historians play in countering both creeping and hard-charging authoritarian politics?" We share Kramer's conviction that in times such as these, radical historians can disrupt inevitabilities, excavate lost alternatives and widen the horizons of empathy. This task should also involve disrupting both the silencing and the falsification of the past since, as Palestinian political historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2013) suggests that history

> is regularly unkind to the defeated, the marginal, and the oppositional. This is even more the case when writing history becomes the suppression of an inconvenient past in the service of the present, or even the celebration of imperial deeds. (309)

Canadian sociologist Gary Kinsman (2010, n.p.), concerned about social and historical amnesia and how the radical roots of movements and community resistance can be so readily replaced with more "respectable" liberal versions of history, reminds us of the need to overcome the "social organization of forgetting". Drawing a curtain over the critical histories of people's struggles – those of the "marginal" and "oppositional" – in favour of more simplified versions is quite consistent with the kinds of neoliberal tellings of history that privilege individuals' achievements in place of the rich, nuanced and often dangerous and difficult stories of the collective struggles of many ordinary people. We can see this through the ways in which the struggle against apartheid in South Africa – which involved thousands of people organising, in different liberation movements and political tendencies – has often been reduced to the life and words of Nelson Mandela and the omission or erasure of contributions of liberation movements outside of the African National Congress (ANC) (see David Johnson, Archie L. Dick and Trevor Ngwane in this volume). We see similar dynamics in the dominant focus on middle-class male leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in the freedom struggle in India, and the erasure or downplaying of a wide range of popular resistance, including women's struggles, workers' strikes and peasant revolts, and

revolutionary, anti-imperialist and sometimes armed movements. British feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham (1997) suggests that writing the history of women is part of "an ongoing recasting of historical 'knowledge'; who and what gets into the record of the past are contentious political matters, and women's history, like labour history or Black history, has contributed to the argument" (3) (see also Dick in this volume in relation to women's role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa). In many instances, the work and significance of small groups of people engaged in long-haul organising is erased from our collective memories. However, an appreciation of such history is indispensable to organising today. For Sears (2014), a major task for contemporary movement organising "is to assess the continuities and discontinuities that differentiate the current period from previous ones and to develop appropriate organizing methods and analytical tools to suit current conditions" (99).

Historians and forms of historical work and education have sometimes stood with one foot in academia or formal education institutions and one foot in movements. The chronicle of the History Workshop in Britain and South Africa (Nieftagodien 2010) is one example of intentional historical education in socialist movements (see also Johnson, in this volume). A conscious approach to preserving and educating about movement histories was present in the work of E. P. Thompson and others, and in many strands of oral and social history. Within some movements, the importance of independent learning (formal and informal) has been a long-standing theme. This has sometimes included induction and socialisation processes for new participants who have routinely been taught in terms of particular readings of movement history (while critical analysis of the supposed "lessons of the past" has been central both to internal dissent and to unorthodox historiography regarding these movements).

Recycling or recovering relevant ideas and concepts from earlier struggles requires us to be aware of the pitfalls of constructing imagined histories and continuities with the past; we should also avoid trying to formulaically replicate past victories in changed conditions and contexts. We must also be wary of the tendency to automatically avoid 'old tactics' in new contexts simply because they did not work in other situations. Alleyne (2002, 179) contends that history can be "an important resource and terrain of imagination and action". We agree. But just as the dominant approaches to historical scholarship have been challenged by Indigenous Peoples, Black, Third World, working-class and other peoples, dominant and existing movement histories – including ones that circulate widely within some movements – must also be critically interrogated and problematised. For example, Nadeau (2009), through an anti-colonial and critical race analysis, re-centres the historiography of Canadian feminism, previously dominated by a liberal multicultural treatment, and which had marginalised anti-racist organising currents within it. Therefore, engaging with movement history is not only about unearthing forgotten or hidden archives, documents and memories, but is also about re-reading what might be there, but through different lenses. Perhaps, as Tithi Bhattacharya (2017, n.p.) asks:

> [w]hen we write the memory of class struggle of our era shall we abandon the struggle for Palestine, antiracism and feminism to the margins of our

> chronicle and await the purely magical workplace struggle to emerge out of a vacuum? Or shall we try again to reread Marx and think about the relationality of struggle? If the latter, then to be the chroniclers of this memory we need archivists appropriate for the task, or organisational forms that do not envisage the future only as an endless repetition of the past or try to squeeze social reality into a convenient Marx or Lenin quotation. . . . Those organisational forms that can force a futural anticipation onto the past will perhaps be our first Maroon shelters from where a new 'horizon of expectations' can be forged.

Our sense is that we cannot afford the costs of historical and social amnesia for contemporary and future struggles. Such amnesia risks losing the thread and texture of what it takes to bring about social change, with all of its tensions and contradictions, and threatens to leave us with a version of history that glosses over or ignores the significance of behind-the-scenes organising. Such amnesia can paper over the conflicts, tensions and power dynamics that have been part of these organising efforts and from which we can also learn. Rahila Gupta (2004), of the British women's rights organisation Southall Black Sisters, notes the importance – and challenges – for activists documenting and reflecting on practice: "It is not easy for activists to sit down and record their work, but in this age of information overload you need to record in order almost to prove that you exist" (3).

We do not suggest that there is a neat binary relationship between the remembering and forgetting of history in movements for change. There are complex, often context-specific tensions around social amnesia, memory, and the ways in which history is (or may not be) remembered or understood as being relevant to contemporary struggles for change. How and which histories get absorbed and are used in community organising/movements? Whose knowledge, whose memory and whose histories are deemed authoritative, reliable and trustworthy? How do we avoid romanticising earlier struggles, hegemonic versions and understandings within movements while critically interrogating dominant or official accounts prevalent in broader society? In some contexts, common sense, yet problematic and distorted versions of history and historical narratives, can be produced without much fanfare or scrutiny and circulate rapidly within activist networks, and broader society, and not least in these days of instantaneous dissemination and publishing through digital media.

Digging for justice, sowing seeds of change: activist archives

Partly in dialogue with Flinn's (2007, 2010; Flinn and Stevens 2009) earlier work on independent and community archives, several chapters (for example, Flinn, Ramamurthy and Wilson) in this collection document and reflect on activist and movement processes and activities which do not create archives for passive consumption, but rather bring contemporary activist knowledge into direct dialogue with earlier struggles, and the practices, ideas and visions that were part of them. Around the world, some socially engaged academics have collaborated with community organisations, social movements and activists to digitise or otherwise preserve and make accessible publications of organisations that do not have the

resources to create archives (Flinn 2010; Ramamurthy 2013). Such initiatives can be useful and necessary resources for activist learning and knowledge production.

This collection also emerges from decades of our own involvement with organisations and struggles committed to political education and action, conversations and collaborations with colleagues and comrades seeking relevant ways to preserve their collective histories and/or engage intergenerationally. How this happens can vary considerably across contexts and moments of conjuncture. Rather than imposing a predefined approach, in this collection we sought to allow for creative thinking about activist archives, broadly understood, and approaches to history's contribution to political education and struggle knowledge relevant to particular communities and struggles – for preservation, dissemination, education and mobilisation purposes.

Community archives and histories seek to preserve and make accessible material usually not available elsewhere (Flinn 2010). For example, they document less visible communities and challenge absences and biases in dominant historical narratives. The nature of many independent/community/activist collections does not fit well with narrow, perhaps overly restrictive, professional definitions of records and archives (Flinn 2007, 2010) and professional archival literature and heritage disciplines. Flinn (see this volume) is optimistic that non-aligned and accessible institutions with radical collecting policies and radical interests offer interesting possibilities of growth and interest at present. Moreover, he contends that while there may have not been many large victories for those who wish to argue for an alternative to capitalism and injustice,

> [t]he archive collections held by many independent activist groups suggest this alternative, contingent world. By recording the many examples of people's struggles against injustice and repression and their attempts to construct alternative ways of living, it shows that even when not recording success, the archives document contestation and resistance rather than acquiescence and passivity. As such, this gives hope and inspiration to those who follow. For those that interact directly with the archives and indeed in these movements more generally, the documenting of those struggles and the sense that another world is possible, that the possibility of a different past and different future is contained within the archive is tremendously significant on an emotional and intellectual level.
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> (Flinn, 37, in this volume)

Several other chapters in this book also attempt to think through activist archival practices and possibilities, illustrating and exploring how activists do and can construct 'useful' challenging histories, and how these are employed in contemporary struggles. Building on our ongoing work on the dynamics of learning processes and research within social movements, we hope that this approach will generate valuable insights into ways in which learning and knowledge take place through building such archives and historical memory. This approach challenges dominant tendencies to overlook intellectual contributions of activism, and recognises the importance of ideas largely generated outside of the academe, often incrementally, collectively and informally (Foley 1999; Holst 2002; Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Vally et al., 2013; Choudry 2015; Sears 2014).

Outline of this book

This collection includes the experiences and original research of scholars and activists documenting the legacies of student, Black and other liberation struggles in the US, Indigenous Peoples' activism as these relate to international fora, student struggles in Iran, the political tradition of Palestinian history, working class education and anti-racist activism in Britain, and a review of an Argentinian historian's work with history in worker education settings. An edited collection like this has inevitable limitations as to its geographical scope, but nonetheless we feel that the contributors in this volume reflect a range of qualitative methodological approaches to activist knowledge production, and more specifically, offer important insights into the production, dissemination and utilisation of critical histories.

The recent nature of South Africa's liberal democratic transition from apartheid, "one of the most significant events of the twentieth century" (Alexander 2002, 1), provides a useful case study to reflect on earlier movement histories, memories and ideas in relation to contemporary struggles. The global themes discussed in this book are starkly prominent in South Africa – these include vibrant education social movements, issues of racism and class stratification in South African historiography, the significance of archives and the importance of documenting struggles. The six chapters on South Africa include community organising under apartheid in Soweto and other Black working class communities (Ngwane); research into the archives of the international Alexander Defence Committee named after Neville Alexander (Dick); a critical assessment of the impact of popular historical books from the anti-apartheid era and post-apartheid biographies of nationalist figures (Johnson); contemporary lessons from educational organising and struggles under apartheid (Enver Motala's chapter on the South African Committee on Higher Education [SACHED]); and continuity and change in the educative role of cultural activism in the townships of the Western Cape (Emile YX? Jansen and Paul Hendricks). Several of these chapters are written by scholar-activists who played a vital role in movements under apartheid and continue to do so in contemporary struggles.

The book's chapters are organised into four sections which reflect interconnected themes. These are: 1) engaging with activist/movement archives; 2) learning and teaching militant histories; 3) lessons from liberatory and anti-imperialist struggles and 4) learning from student/education struggles. As noted, there is a range of approaches to how chapters address activist/movement engagements with history. A number of the authors centre empirically grounded reflections on experience and experimentation with educating from and about history within social movement and activist contexts. In his chapter on history and labour education in Argentina, Pablo Pozzi employs, in part, a critical auto-ethnographical approach to share and think through the challenges and possibilities of 'teaching history' outside of formal educational institutions. Ngwane also draws from a critical autobiographical approach, as well as interviews with other community activists. Koni Benson, Asher Gamedze and Akosua Koranteng reflect on their recent experiences of creating and sharing critical African history content beyond the university with the *Know Your Continent* (KYC) popular education course, in the context where today's student movements in South Africa demand that education be decolonised. Others, like chapters by Flinn, Dick, Ramamurthy and

Wilson explicitly discuss the politics, possibilities and potential of activist archival resources used in later phases of struggle.

Salhab reflects on how political practices are transmitted between generations of Palestinians, based in part on his experience as someone from a newer generation of activists. He discusses how different models of popular, national and democratic organising are passed on through incremental, below-the-radar, often incidental and informal forms of learning and knowledge production that occur through shared political work. For Salhab, it was working with cadres from past revolutionary generations that generated an understanding of the history and revolutionary tradition rather than studying its history more consciously and intentionally.

An underlying thread running throughout the book pertains to questioning taken-for-granted histories – those deemed to be authoritative, and considering how empirically grounded documentation of struggles can be an important corrective to partial or problematic dominant narratives. Sharon Venne and Irene Watson's chapter centres Indigenous perspectives of history, and in particular the history of Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations in ways which dispute many official and liberal academic and NGO accounts which have circulated, an analysis generated from decades of commitment to self-determination and decolonisation rather than abstract theorising. In doing so (and as with other chapters) they contribute to critical historical resources of great use to current and future generations.

Chapters by Mahdi Ganjavi and Shahrzad Mojab, Robin Kelley and Martha Biondi all engage with earlier periods of student/campus struggles in Iran and in the USA which have left rich, yet often forgotten legacies, and important questions for contemporary activism. For Ganjavi and Mojab, this entails critically exploring the main themes and debates in an almost forgotten 1972 issue of a leftist student movement journal, to revive interest in the history of the student movement and its political imagination, its creativity in resistance, and its call for solidarity. In their chapters, Kelley and Biondi take readers on important historical journeys of Black and Third World liberation politics from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s which shine new light and perspectives on the contributions they can make for present and future US radical politics and intellectual work. In his contribution, Motala revisits the historical context, work and practices of the South African Committee on Higher Education (SACHED), an independent, non-governmental educational organisation in order to help conceptualise an alternative educational system and its practical implications in South Africa today. Cultural work has been central to many liberation movements, and in the book's final chapter, Jansen and Hendricks engage the history of the rich veins of cultural activism which have run through community struggles in different eras in the Western Cape in South Africa.

Closing thoughts: present realities, future directions

Angela Davis's reflections in her 2016 Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, "Legacies and Unfinished Activisms" (Davis 2016, n.p.) resonate with our attempts to

grapple with the continuities and discontinuities, antinomies and ambiguities of past struggles, present realities and future directions. Appreciating the sacrifices and struggles of the past, and speaking to the current student struggles for decolonisation and against the commodification of education in South Africa and the struggle against racism in the United States, she expressed her profound gratitude for these struggle legacies, but noted that these should not be received uncritically:

> An essential dimension of the learning process is critical thinking, learning how to question things as they are, learning how to imagine the possibility of something different is the very essence of education. Facts are easily attainable . . . but what do we do with that information? Steve Biko and his comrades led vast numbers of students to raise questions about apartheid and to imagine a different world even as they clashed with the world as it was. Knowledge is useless unless it assists us to question habits, social practices, institutions, ideologies and the state. This questioning cannot end even when victories are won.
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> Students are now recognising that the legacies of past struggles are not static. If these legacies mean anything at all, they are mandates to develop new strategies, new technologies of struggles. And these legacies, when they are taken up by new generations reveal unfulfilled promises of the past and therefore give rise to new activisms. As an activist of Steve Biko's generation, I have to constantly remind myself that the struggles of our contemporary times should be thought of as productive contradictions because they constitute a rupture with past struggles, but at the same time they reside on a continuum with those struggles and they have been enabled by activisms of the past. They are unfinished activisms. . . .
>
> The young activists of today stand on our shoulders, and precisely because they stand on our shoulders, they see something of what we have seen, but they also see and understand a great deal more. They are beginning to address unresolved questions and some of the erasures and foreclosures. They stand on our shoulders, but we do not provide a steady foundation precisely because our questions were questions of a different era. Our critiques were expressed in the inadequate discourses of the past. The young activists want to reveal the erasures. They want to question what we did not have the full capacity to question in our time . . . they sway, they teeter, they totter, they falter, make terrible mistakes, just as we did at their age when we stood on the shoulders of those who came before us. But just as we learned from our mistakes, they must be allowed to learn from theirs. . . .

Today, besides facing an unprecedented ecological crisis brought about by unbridled capitalist exploitation of our planet, progressive struggles must contend with other serious challenges such as the latest wave of nationalist, racist and pseudo-populist politics that seek to divide and rule communities already fractured by years of social and economic upheaval, repression and growing inequality. These reactionary political agendas divert attention away from the real causes of today's social and economic problems.

As scholars of education and participants in many struggles for change in recent decades, it is our sense – and most certainly, our hope – that notwithstanding the hackneyed, discredited, yet pervasive 'end of history' ideology, and the anti-intellectualism that sometimes permeates activist spaces, communities and broader society, that new generations of young people, dissatisfied with inadequate explanations for the state of the world, and seeking ways to change it, are searching for other ways of approaching and understanding history. We have encountered many young people who are hungry to learn about how people have struggled, what they have done, how they have envisioned alternatives, all as part of developing their own political, social and environmental activism.

Figuring out the historical context for the conditions in which people live and struggle has been key for many movements that have opposed – and sought to better understand – capitalism and colonialism throughout the ages. Essential to this endeavour is fashioning tools from forms and histories of resistance that are sometimes forgotten and buried. It is also about appreciating struggles at the margins or dissenting currents within larger movements, the ideas that they produce and their contributions to organising. We need to also bring to light ways in which the latter struggles sometimes get overwritten by dominant accounts which focus on individual leaders and more visible or more powerful organisations.

Returning to the earlier notion of historical knowledge as 'slow thought', what does this mean in an era of widespread digital communications? In asking what it means to 'be political' in a digital age, Fenton (2016) tackles key questions of the relationships between organisational form, political action and radical movements, arguing for repoliticising the economy by returning wealth distribution to the centre of politics, and resocialising the political through understanding the social as the building blocks of the political. In doing so, and while acknowledging the urgency and gravity of contemporary ecological, economic, social and political problems, Fenton also ponders the negative impacts of the speed-up of communications for today's activism. She warns that:

> in the race to respond, there is a danger that the movement runs roughshod over the slower process of political organization, which also built the capacity to deliberate, establish close relations and trust between participants, and consider long-term objectives, strategies and tactics – all of things that political activism requires to collaborate effectively. . . . The trade-off between speed and long-term organizational capacity-building also threatens to diminish the slow burn of skills development of activists who help push a protest politics towards being a political movement.
>
> (127)

To illustrate some further concerns about the politics of knowledge in relation to understanding movements for change today, Robyn Rodriguez (2010) cautions those interested in documenting resistance to neoliberal capitalism not to be over-reliant on the Internet for research since they may miss important grassroots, self-organised groups. She writes that we can be "too readily taken in by

the technological savvy of NGOs who can occupy significant space in the virtual, if not always in the sensate world" (65). Discussing migrants' political networks, she further urges that we "engage research that allows us insight into local contexts of struggle as it is in those sites where we might identify forms of resistance not immediately apparent in transnational spaces (virtual or otherwise)" (66). This is not to deny the possibilities of digital technology and a range of social media platforms also used by some activists and movements to share, preserve, engage and educate from historical and contemporary resources, oral histories, radical biographies and more. But we should remain cautious and critical in making assessments about the who, how, where and the why of popular resistance.

Returning to the excerpt from Marx at the beginning of this chapter, while wary of simply attempting to "squeeze social reality into a convenient Marx or Lenin quotation" (Bhattacharya 2017, n.p), and recognising the urgent action that is vital on so many fronts today, we remain convinced of the care and commitment needed to reflect, prepare the ground, plant seeds and grow vibrant movements and politics of resistance, and of continuing to work through, in our different contexts, how we might critically conjure up the spirits of the past in the service of liberation.

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