



Radical Histories II: Otilie Abrahams Speaks

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INTRODUCTION

This contribution is an outline of an African radical history project. It has been facilitated through interdisciplinary and transnational dialogues aimed at stimulating interest and learning amongst ourselves and youth activists from Southern Africa. This article forms part of part 2 of a radical histories series. The first part of the series "Radical Histories I: SACHED and Some Others," was published as an interactive timeline and reflection piece in Pathways to Free Education Volume iii: Third World and Social Welfare, 2017. Radical Histories II is dedicated to the life and work of the late Otilie Abrahams whose contributions to the Namibian liberation struggle as well as the post-Apartheid educational and community development have been remarkable. Aunty Tillie, as she was known by those that she worked with, was a radical feminist and educator, the founder and principal of Jakob Marengo Tutorial College. She was passionate about Paulo Freire's popular education theory, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This chapter highlights some of her activist-educational experiences not only in Namibia but also in Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania and Sweden. We were deeply honored and privileged to have been able to document her narrating her own story during a study tour exchange of southern African activists - Youth Without Borders - which we were part of organizing as the education programming team in 2017.

The workshops were co-facilitated through embodied, visual and archival approaches as a way of generating a trans-historic and activist learning experience. We intersect our experiences from research and practice in theatre, music, visual arts and history education to create meaningful and relevant content that is generally excluded from mainstream archives of learning and culture. The Radical Histories II workshop was initially held in Katutura, Windhoek, on two separate occasions in October 2018. The first one was at the Katutura Community Art Centre with participants and artists as part of Operation Odalate Naiteke, a revolutionary culture festival. The second workshop was with senior high school students of history at the Jakob Marengo Technical College, a school founded by Tillie Abrahams in the 1980s. It was also conducted at The Interim People's Library in Kensington in Cape Town, as part of a Know Your Continent African history workshop series. This was organized with the Popular Education Project for a group of interested in African history. -The course looked at histories of migration, racism, spirituality, Cape Town, borders, the city, and of resistance movements. The political life journey of Aunty Tillie was the content of the course's last session.

For the workshops in Katutura we used flour to create a map in the shape of the continent on the ground. . For the workshops in Kensington we used a large printed outline of the map and attached colorful yarn to the text cards. All the participants then received a text card or two with details about particular person, process or organization relevant to Otilie's life history. After discussing the details of the history on the cards in groups, people had to share a bit of that history with the group. People would often read out these cards which opened to animated dialogues about these moments and organizations. Then they had to place the card somewhere on the map, anywhere they chose. We used stones to hold down the text cards to give a visual representation of Otilie Abrahams' life journey and all the work she was involved in. . These text cards are also included as part of this article- they can be studied and digested in and of themselves, or copied and cut out to use in this kind of mapping activity. In the workshops, the reading and dialogue of each card was followed by placing it somewhere on the African map. The placing of cards did not necessarily have to be placed where the actual geographical location of the organization or moment was- the conversations around the choices each participant made about where they chose to place the history text card led to endless directions for the conversations, and for the future. This was part of the bigger dialogue in which workshop participants were invited to share responses and thoughts and map other radical histories and questions that came to mind.

This contribution is structured in the following way. The first section is a transcript of Otilie Abrahams talking about her life journey to Youth Without Borders, a group of activists from the Southern Africa region during a study tour to Namibia in 2017. The second section is a fold out map of the continent that highlights moments and movements of her journey that are elaborated in longer text boxes in the following section. This map can also be used as a template should you wish to carry out and build onto this workshop plan. The text cards give wider context and further detail on these key moments and movements mentioned by Otilie Abrahams, highlighting a history of over 100 years of liberation struggle at the heart of this piece.

We trust in the pedagogical potential of this dynamic and border crossing narrative to inspire modes of futures of work. Artists, educators and historians can draw a lot from Aunty Tillie's

resilience, solidarity and commitment to the struggle as a way of re-imagining the futures of working towards liberation.

LIVING ARCHIVES

Otilie Abrahams addressed southern African youth activists at an exchange in Namibia Jan Mohr School, Windhoek, 26 May 2017

The input started off with Otilie looking at the photos, news paper clippings, maps and drawings that were up on the wall from the morning session. Starts off pointing to a map and discussing where her late husband, Kenny Abrahams lived- in District Six/Walmer Estate:

He went to school at Upper Ashley (primary) and then he went to Trafalgar High School. I meet him through my older brother who was also studying at Trafalgar and the two of them went to UCT and took a medical course at UCT.

The thing you must understand is that from a very young age we were actually involved in politics. You couldn't be born at that time without being involved in politics. And as soon as we got to Cape Town, especially to Trafalgar, we got involved. We were with people like Tabata (pointing to his photo on the wall). We also joined APDUSA. We also worked with contract workers from what was then called South West Africa.

In the Unity Movement, APDUSA, and all those organizations, where we felt that we would never really get rid of apartheid through political means only. We felt it was time to start an armed struggle. We then formed an organization called the Yu Chi Chan- which is Chinese for guerrilla warfare. It was called the YC3 Club, and we had people like Neville, Fikile, Dulcie, and us, we were all part of that particular organization. We had a bit of trouble from the people in APDUSA who felt that to speak about the armed struggle was very dangerous- that we were endangering the struggle. Kenny and Neville were eventually suspended by SOYA but we continued in this vein. And when the time came, we came to Namibia.

Very soon after we came to Namibia, we got to hear that some people who belonged to our underground cells were arrested. At the time my husband and I were working in Rehoboth, and it was a place where, well, I don't know how many of you know the history of the so called Basters. It was semi-independent. It was the only place in Namibia or South West Africa where black people were allowed to own guns.

Now fortunately a short while before we came back to Namibia, my parents had bought a farm in the Rehoboth area, which made me a citizen of that area. So when the police came for Kenny - we had arrived in Rehoboth and within about an hour - the police were there to take Kenny out as a prohibited immigrant. Now as I said Rehoboth was semi-autonomous, the Council of Basters immediately declared my husband a citizen because I have a right to be a citizen, and he's married to me.

But that wasn't the end of the story. When people like Neville and Marcus and others, were arrested and taken to Robben Island- the police, very early in the morning, when it was still dark, we saw fires in the mountains surrounding Rehoboth. That was actually the police who came to arrest Kenny and that is where you had this situation here (points to the newspaper clipping on the wall). Luckily the people there were very well organized and within a few minutes you had about 400 people there with guns. And as you see here the newspaper writes "Rehoboters bereid om te sterf vir hulle dokter." It says: "Rehoboters Were Willing to Die for their Doctor". They took out arms, they told the police if you touch that man we will shoot, today there's going to be blood. It was so dramatic- as you can see there these people standing there with guns ready to fight. So, we decided on a play, that I was going to take my car and the children because we had two children- and I was so upset and said I was going to go to the farm.

And while everybody was still looking at us, Kenny slipped on his stomach like a snake and into the car of a certain Mr de Kerk. And while they were looking at us, they drove them over to a place called Sam Khubis where the Rehoboth people fought the colonial powers. It's very dramatic when he tells how when they came to every house and just told the people what is going on, and how the men just took their blankets and food and their guns and they moved up to Sam Khubis ready to fight. In any case that was the first time that these people tried to arrest Kenny. And Kenny escaped from there.

I was then informed that the police are coming for me because people like Marcus and others were also being arrested and it was decided that I had to leave. I was disguised as a Herero woman. You've seen the Herero costumes – the women with the big turbans – haven't you seen them? And SWAPO got me some papers with which I could leave. My name was Elsa Kairazikira and I was a girl, a young girl at school and I became pregnant, and I was now expelled from my school and I was now being sent back to my parents by the Stanleys. I don't know if those from Botswana know the Stanleys? I was supposed to be expelled and I was supposed to go back to my father. That is how we escaped through the desert. And I was in Francistown when I got a telegram from Kenny that he will be coming. And I went to the station and waited and waited and Kenny did not appear.

What actually happened- on his way to Francistown at a place called Ghanzi(where are the Botswana people? We are here!) So, at Ghanzi the South African Police, who had put on masks actually came to arrest my husband and Andreas Shipanga and Paul Smith and a man called Beukes who was instrumental in getting the people to stand up for my husband. They were actually arrested there and Kenny was taken back to Roeland Street jail and had to appear in court. In any case as you can read there, in the Argus where they wrote that Kenny was arrested in Botswana, and the Botswana government said they had absolutely nothing to do with it. Luckily we had friends in Britain who raised the matter in parliament and they demanded that Kenny had to be returned by the South African Police.

Eventually he was returned and we went into Zambia – is there anybody from Zambia here? So, my husband worked as a doctor there and I taught at a school called Chizongwe Secondary School, for 5 years. And eventually I was declared a prohibited immigrant and the lawyer took them to court and said that my body must be produced in court. Habeas corpus! And I must be told why I am a prohibited immigrant. Kenny was arrested in Isoka – does anybody know where Isoka is? And it is so ironic because when we came to Zambia it was in Isoka that Kenneth Kaunda had a meeting and spoke so glowingly about us and said the Abrahams' will always be welcome in Zambia and that is the place where Kenny was arrested. In the meantime, we made arrangements to go to Sweden and he was eventually released and taken to the airport and we went to live in Sweden.

Eventually, after 15 years- there was Resolution 435. We came back to Namibia, and we immediately started mobilizing people- working with people: growing food. Everything based on participatory democracy. In the years in Sweden I was writing a PhD thesis on the works of Armah you know the one who wrote 'The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born', a Ghanaian writer. My thesis was actually based on the fact that when we went out to Africa - this was the time African countries were getting their independence – we find that every time an African country gets independence we see a counter-coup and a counter-coup. And were asking if we all fought for independence why is it that people are regressing? My thesis was- it is because the people are not part of their governance. They even used the phrase 'One man, Vote once'. In Africa you just voted, the people are in parliament you are still living in poverty, you haven't got a house your kids are not going to school and when there's election in 5 years, what do you do? You vote for the same party. And we thought that for as long as people in Africa are doing that, we will not get anywhere. So, when we came to Namibia we felt whatever we do is going to be based on the context of participatory democracy.

We then formed an organization called The Namibian Nationhood Trust or The Namibian Nationhood Programme. Our idea was that we were going to find ways and means of involving people in their own governance. We felt very strongly that that was the only thing that one could do to liberate Africa. We started with agricultural projects in the South where the people would say what they wanted to do, how they wanted to do it and they would accept responsibility for it.

We also then started this school called Jacob Marengo. We were helped in this by Alexander. He was at that time working for SACHED and he helped also not only with the curriculum. He also helped us to find support from the Ford Foundation with which we started our school. When we started in 1985 we had about 25 students from South Africa including the students from Paballelo (Uppington, where the youth exchange had stopped en route to Windhoek). So in any case: the motto for Jacob Marengo is 'Education for Liberation.' That is why we did not have a system of students representative councils. We have a system of Turumas, or groups, where every child in the school has a specific task to perform. The idea was that if children are taught from a very young age to be involved, when they leave school they will also insist on being part of their own governance. The school last year had over 1000 children and about 500 of them were from Angola. We have children from Zimbabwe, the Congo from various parts of Africa because sub-equatorial to us is very important. This year of course we have about 960 because many of the Angolan children had to return because of the falling oil prices they can't afford the rent they are being charged all over. So that was the one project. Then we also started a few pre-schools. At the moment we have two of them running. We did a lot of campaigning with the Minister of Education because it seemed as if people didn't understand the importance of early childhood education. I must say that the Ministry has been very good as far as this is concerned and we did a lot of campaigning and eventually people started really moving to implement this issue of early childhood education.

In 1975 when we returned from exile, we established an organization after a few months called the Namibian Women's Association because there were many women in the political organizations. But the women's wing of political organizations was only really called upon during conferences and you needed to make tea and give people food and all that. We said we aren't really interested in that, we want to establish an organization of women for women by women and that is why we established NAWA. We did some work amongst the women but I must say recently we've really neglected the organization because NAWA's projects have become very important to us – it's running the pre-schools and also the Children's Movement.

In the Girl Child Movement in part of the Children's Movement where you get children to teach other children whatever is necessary. Now this one is based on 5 principles:

- The first one is respect for yourself- which means that you are going to do everything that you can to get the best out of yourself. If you're at school, you study as hard as you can. Whatever you do, you do the best you can be.
- Second is respect for your neighbour -which includes girls. We stress the concept of equality – there's no gender discrimination.
- Concept three: respect for the environment. Today most of our work centres around the concept of climate change.
- Those were the three principles that the South Africans had adapted but then we wanted to add two more:
- The concept of critical thinking, became number four.
- Number five: the issue of participatory democracy.

The Children's Movement is based on the concept that children can do a lot, provided that they have the assistance of adults. And our motto is actually 'We shall change the world.' We want children to understand that their opinions are important, that their ideas are important,

and they can actually achieve this if they sat together and they worked together, if they unite. I have some papers here if there are people interested in Namibian history, and on the Children's Movement. I thought I won't make a long speech because I thought if you wanted to ask questions, you are very welcome to do so.

Q&A

Who was Jacob Marengo/Why name the school after him?

His history was totally forgotten. His mother was a Nama and his father was a Herero, and he was living in the Karasberg mountains. He was one of the first people who tried to unite the people in Namibia or what was called South West Africa at the time- hence the colonialists. That is why some called him the black Napoleon. That is one of the reasons why we decided that Neville should actually run with this. If you want to find out more about Jacob Marengo it's all in here. He was a master in the art of guerrilla war. The Germans would attack, but when the Germans start to attack they would retreat- he would lead them into the desert and just let them die. It sounds very heartless. I am sure if he was alive, he would be one of the people in the Yu Chi Chan Club. He knew everything about guerrilla war. One of the reasons why he's so important is that he tried to unite the people in good time before the colonialists came. He wasn't a tribalist, he was a real nationalist. This is why we also decided to call this school Jacob Marengo. He was a very accomplished person, he spent a few years in Germany could speak German very fluently. He was really a man of the people. When we came, people didn't even mention him. This is why we called the school Jacob Marengo. He is very low key but he was a brilliant fighter and a statesman.

A comrade from Botswana asks about their time in Francistown:

You know there was a man called Benny I don't know what is surname is. He was a builder and he gave us a caravan to stay in when we were in Francistown so we stayed there... We did not stay there for very long- a few weeks. That was at the same time that Wolpe and Goldreich – do you know who they are?, escaped- the – the Rivonia Trial people. They were all in Botswana at that time. You know you had the world press there because you had the whole Rivonia Trial people and our people were all there at the same time. And things were really electric there at that time.

A FeesMustFall activist from South Africa asks about the formation of SWAPO in Cape Town and the relationship to the Unity Movement:

SWAPO was formed in Cape Town. Before that, Ovamboland Peoples Organization was formed here, and some of the people like I don't know if you know Mburumba Kerina, he was at the UN. We had some people at the UN and you couldn't come there with your organization called Ovamboland Peoples' Organization. We wanted to make the thing national so that it doesn't only include the Ovambo people but everybody else. Then we had several meetings in Cape Town and they also had meetings in Namibia and eventually the organization was formed in that way.

...The Unity Movement had very good lectures and we thought its good that the people with whom we were going to work with in Namibia, are au fait, with what we talked about. Andreas Shipanga was in SWAPO also and was included in the Yu Chi Chan movement. We didn't want to include too many people from SWAPO because if the cell was discovered then it would endanger the existence of SWAPO. So we only included 2-3 from SWAPO in the underground.

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