

A Review of 'Wild Children — Domesticated Dreams'

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LAYLA ABDELRAHIM. *Wild Children — Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood. (2013). 130 pp. \$21.95 (paperback). (ISBN: 9781552665488)

Layla AbdelRahim's *Wild Children—Domesticated Dreams* is an engaging, critical examination of civilization and knowledge production. Distinguishing between cultures of wildness and cultures of domestication, the author demonstrates how civilization involves the latter, with mandatory education as the means for socializing children into civilized human beings. AbdelRahim is a proponent of anarcho-primitivism, an anarchist theory based on a critique of industrial civilization and its "hierarchical and parasitic political and socio-environmental economic systems" (AbdelRahim & Anonymous, 2013, "Do you think that AP is real," para. 1). Rooted in this orientation, *Wild Children* builds on anarchist theories and radical critiques of education (such as in the work of Peter Kropotkin, John Holt, John Taylor Gatto and John Zerzan) while offering a truly interdisciplinary study that draws from anthropology, ethology, philosophy, sociology and various areas of cultural and ethnic studies. The primary context of the book is Canadian, with transnational and cross-cultural comparisons made with various other perspectives and practices.

Wild Children is brief in length, consisting of an introduction, three distinct sections of no more than thirty pages each, and concluding thoughts. It is written in accessible language with the author's voice present throughout, including personal anecdotes describing interactions with and disarming observations by her daughter Ljuba when she was between the ages of three and nine years. However, despite its length and accessible language, *Wild Children* cannot be described as an *easy* read: the issues with which AbdelRahim grapples are anything but simplistic. The author offers a powerfully developed critique of civilized epistemology — the system of knowledge supporting industrial civilization — and of the institutionalized cruelty and apathy towards other human and nonhuman beings that civilization entails.

Throughout my reading of the book I was reminded of Ashanti Alston's (2011) observation that the desire to be free and to learn requires that we be daring with the material we read, knowing that what we read can indeed change our lives. *Wild Children* is this kind of challenging material, exposing and calling into question assumptions about what we think we know about civilization, education and ourselves. AbdelRahim accomplishes this, partly by using what many readers will likely consider provocative language, which considers human and nonhuman beings in ways that refuse customary anthropocentrism.

For example, AbdelRahim argues that, in civilization, a minority of people control and consume material capital and resources, while the majority of beings are considered as human and nonhuman resources to be consumed. She notes how we are taught to accept that "cows, chicken and pigs are incarcerated in concentration camps and locked in stalls for slaughter" (p. 29) as well as "taught to know how to breed ourselves and other animals in captivity or to know the rape of bovine or turkey women as 'artificial insemination'" (p. 56). Through practicing a culture of domestication, humans alter the

raison d'être of other beings, redefining them in terms of our own perceived benefit. And by learning to ignore the suffering and moral implications of this treatment of animals, we condition ourselves to ignore the suffering of others perceived as different and denied of personhood.

AbdelRahim insists that this indifference to the suffering of others does not come naturally to humans. Rather, it is the result of systematic socialization: “civilized knowledge has to educate its ‘resources’ into accepting its perspective by destroying their systems of livelihood, relationships and self-knowledge, and replacing these with civilized monoculturalism” (p. 22). Parents begin this indoctrination of children through coercion, modeling and deference to institutional authority, and teachers continue the process in “artificial ‘educational’ settings” (p. 41). Conditioning occurs through the threat of violence “be it through grades, spanking, getting sent outside or locked inside, the withholding of candy or retraction of scholarships, the promise of future joblessness, homelessness and starvation or whatever other form of punishment,” thus creating a “logic of endangerment” (p. 47). We are fearfully socialized to defer to institutional authority to the extent that we “think and live through it and on behalf of it at the expense of personal instincts” (p. 82).

Both a strength, and an unresolved tension of the author’s rigorous critique of education, is how her own extensive education has clearly facilitated her ability to construct such an interdisciplinary and extensive argument. In this sense, to use Audre Lorde’s (2000) terms, AbdelRahim uses the master’s tools to deconstruct the master’s house. She does not place herself outside of her critique and seems to engage critically and self-reflexively with her experiences as a learner and teacher, actively seeking to expose and correct her own socialization into civilization. Issues and concerns raised by her (un-schooled) daughter Ljuba play an important role in this process, pointing to the valuable knowledge that develops naturally in wild children as they explore the world. Thus, while AbdelRahim makes little distinction between education that happens within standardized school systems and various alternative forms of education, the book does point to important alternatives to the violence of mainstream school systems. If we are critical of education that “depends on literacy and verbosity having substituted the natural learning patterns of introspection, action and motion... with inaction, overstimulation and verbal abstraction” (p. 102), for example, it follows that programs of learning that reverse this substitution are a step in the right direction. Free skool, de-schooling and unschooling approaches prioritize self-directed learning through doing, allowing children a much greater freedom of movement and exploration than in mainstream schools. Such approaches offer students the opportunity to design and pursue projects based on their curiosity and imaginations, teaching them to take responsibility for their own learning (Meza-Wilson, 2012; Taylor, 2014).

Ultimately, the challenging critique put forward by AbdelRahim in *Wild Children* invites us to engage in more complex and holistic ways of thinking about ourselves and societies: ways that wrestle the notion of love from the confines of consumerism

and predation; ways that promote empathy, healing, cooperation, mutual aid and our interconnectedness with the world with / in which we live.

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