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Book Review: An Honest Living: A Memoir of Peculiar Itineraries

Author: Steven Salaita
Reviewer: Steve Macek

Over the past few decades, countless college faculty, graduate students, and other members of the American academic community have been fired, suspended, disciplined, "blackballed" or harassed for their criticisms of Israel's violence against Palestinians and of U.S. complicity in that violence. Just in the two years since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on southern Israel and the ensuing Israeli military assault on Gaza alone, we have witnessed tenured professor of anthropology at Muhlenberg College, Maura Finkelstein, dismissed for a post on Instagram critical of Zionism; Northwestern journalism professor Steven Thrasher suspended from teaching for a year (and later denied tenure) for participating in a pro-Palestinian encampment; Columbia University law professor Katherine Franke forced to resign her position of twenty-five years because of her advocacy for Palestinian rights; and eminent Marxist political theorist Jodi Dean suspended from teaching for a semester at Hobart and William Smith Colleges for an article she wrote about the October 7 attack. In the past two years, hundreds of students at schools like UCLA, USC, Columbia, New York University, Harvard, and Vanderbilt have been suspended, expelled or had their degrees revoked for participating in protests against Israel's genocidal campaign against the people of Gaza.

But arguably the most notorious case of a professor facing professional consequences for speaking out about Palestine in recent years is what happened to Dr. Steven Salaita.

Salaita is a Palestinian-American specialist in Indigenous and Arab American literature who writes frequently about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By age 35, he had already published six books and several peer-reviewed articles, a truly awe-inspiring level of scholarly productivity. In 2014, Salaita left a tenured position at Virginia Tech University to join the American Indian Studies program at the University of Illinois as a tenured faculty member. Between the time he signed the contract with Illinois and the start of the fall semester, Israel commenced a bloody two-month-long war on Gaza in response to missile attacks by Hamas. Salaita posted a series of angry, sometimes profanity-laced tweets commenting on Israel's relentless onslaught, which ultimately killed some 2,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians.

Shortly before the start of the semester, Illinois's Chancellor Phyllis Wise, after hearing from wealthy pro-Israel donors upset about Salaita's hiring, decided not to seek approval from the board of trustees for his appointment. Wise later sent out an all-campus message justifying the "un-hiring" of Salaita, declaring that "what we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them" (Jaschik, 2015). The University of Illinois's own faculty committee on academic freedom and the American Association of University Professors conducted separate investigations that both found Salaita's dismissal to be a clear violation of his freedom to engage in "extramural expression" (Reichman et al., 2015). Moreover, the AAUP concluded that the Chancellor's decision to dismiss Salaita without a faculty hearing was "an action categorically inimical to academic due process" (p. 19).

In June 2015, the AAUP formally censured the administration at the University of Illinois for stripping Salaita of a tenured position over the alleged "incivility" of his tweets without due process and for the general climate of academic freedom at the institution. [In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I was a voting delegate at the June 2015 national meeting and voted in favor of the censure.] In November 2015, Salaita settled a breach of contract lawsuit against the school for a reported $600,000 plus legal expenses.

Salaita has already written a detailed personal narrative of, and postmortem on, his firing from Illinois and what the episode reveals about the ways American higher education is implicated in settler-colonialism, racism, and genocide, *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom* (2015). In that book, he also reflects at length on the need to "complicate academic freedom even as we vigorously defend it" because academic freedom "does not fully accommodate dissent" (p. 81).

In his most recent book, *An Honest Living: A Memoir of Peculiar Itineraries* (2024), Salaita meditates on his life and (often unstable) career *after* the Illinois "unhiring" controversy. Unlike *Uncivil Rites,* this book flits around achronologically between his childhood, his years in college and graduate school, and his brief stint at American University of Beirut (from which he was also fired) while returning repeatedly to his main occupation from 2017-2022: driving a school bus. Indeed, the book does not dwell at length on the University of Illinois dismissal because, he says, "I've spoken so much about it over the past eight years that a personal low point threatens to become my identity" (p. 2). The great majority of working people, he attests, "share a similar kind of insecurity: about money, about career, about health, about parenting, about inflation, about war, about sustenance, about ecology" (p. 2). As such, Salaita offers *An Honest Living* as "our memoir", a collective memoir of precarity. "My situation," he avers, "speaks to widespread precariousness and insecurity" (p. 133).

Many of the individual chapters included in the volume appeared first as posts on Salaita's blog and most of them still retain the informality and meandering form of blog posts. All of them mix personal anecdotes and stories with incisive observations about the systematic injustices caused by capitalism, class, racism and imperialism. But Salaita's most pointed and withering remarks are reserved for academia. He notes that "for all its self-congratulation, the academy's loftiest mission is a fierce compulsion to eliminate any

impediment to donations" (p. 9). He also asserts that it is "impossible to reconcile the ideals of academe with its reality":

> The only happy people are the abusers, bullies and the sexual predators, and they're all inherently miserable. Many of us enter the field with dreams of meaningful existence, of *making a difference,* and then are ground down by the social and economic hardships of the profession. (p. 46)

Academia's vaunted commitment to meritocracy and free inquiry is, Salaita contends, especially illusory for Palestinians:

> People might act surprised or skeptical when Palestinians tell horror stories of life in academe, but, if anything, we undersell the horror because even bowdlerized versions of Zionist suppression are unbelievable. Think of it this way: you exist in a space that prides itself on pushing boundaries, on challenging orthodoxy, but your own existence is wholly contingent on a byzantine ability to render yourself nonexistent. (p. 34)

Indeed, one recurring theme throughout the book is Salaita's strong (and no doubt justified) fear of once again being smeared and slandered by supporters of Israel. "For Palestinians in North America," he writes, "Zionist recrimination is a fact of life. It shadows all dreams of success. The grander the dream, the darker the shadow. We always have to be prepared for snitching and defamation" (p. 117). Despite the avowed commitments of colleges and universities to free speech and open debate, despite handbook policies and First Amendment protections that ostensibly guarantee faculty the right to engage in unfettered "extramural utterances," he underscores that "[c]ertain forms of speech will always evoke negative consequences no matter their legal status, particularly those supportive of Indigenous liberation or revolutionary violence" (p.151).

As is perhaps understandable for someone whose career was at least temporarily upended over a series of Twitter posts, Salaita also has much to say about social media. He notes that "members of the learned professions have long bemoaned their receding influence" and that "social media has given them new life as influencers, while also illustrating the low regard with which they're perceived by much of the reading public" (p. 50). Of his own social media use, he ventures that while he is "not a brawler on social media," he often can't help but "squabble and remonstrate" online (p. 77). He grants that "certain sectors of social media" can foster a sense of political community but complains that such communities are fragile, "subject to quick accusations of apostasy or treason" and ultimately "engender timidity and regret" (p. 77). Ultimately, he finds social media "replete with obvious expressions of anxiety" and remarks that online we don't always "encounter rhetors, but exemplars of trauma" (p. 76).

The backlash he faced as a Palestinian critic of Israel in the academy and the anxiety provoked by his brief foray into professional blogging caused Salaita to take a relatively modest-paying job as a school bus driver near his home in Northern Virginia. Driving a bus offered him "an honest living"-- an occupation in which he no longer felt wracked by moral compromises. It also gave him a way to support his family, ample downtime to read and the opportunity to "create a decent body of writing in a space conducive to experimentation" (p. 91). As he explains, "I liked the idea of earning a living beyond the economy of self-absorption in spaces (academe, journalism, social media) where participants monetize a brand and sell

banality to co-ideologues and cultural influencers" (p. 90). Besides, he very quickly developed an affection for some of his co-workers and for many of the children he drove to and from school. In the end, he explains, "as I experienced it, choosing to drive a bus was an affirmation of freedom…[T]here was nothing tragic about becoming a bus driver. The tragedy exists in the ghoulish culture of higher education" (p. 134).

Throughout the book, Salaita is quite open about his own emotional and psychological struggles (crippling anxiety, depression, an eating disorder) and about his aversion to the enforced collegiality and social rituals that mark day-to-day life in academic institutions. He makes no effort to transform himself into a hero or to hide his foibles (like being aloof and a bit of a loner, smoking way too many cigarettes, or sometimes becoming so paralyzed with anxiety that he is unable to answer emails or pick up his phone). Yet, he also emerges from these pages as caring and dutiful son, a devoted partner, and, above all, a loving father. Some of the most poignant passages in the book are the ones where he recounts times he spent with his young son or heartfelt interactions he had with the kindergarteners on his bus.

In the final two chapters of the book, Salaita explains how he made the difficult transition from bus driving back to academia. One day while waiting to pick up his son from school, he scanned the academic job ads and found an open position perfect for him in the English and Comparative Literature Department at the American University of Cairo (where he knew the president and two members of the department he would ultimately join). He applied and, as he suspected he would, landed the job and moved with his family to Cairo. The book ends with Salaita overcoming his nerves before greeting his first class at AUC. As of this writing, he is still employed there.

Ultimately, Steven Salaita insists, his story is not a "cautionary tale." As he explains "I know that I'm not regretful and have never thought about moderating my politics for access and upward mobility" (p. 134). Anyone interested in learning what living one's life without sacrificing your politics for "access and upward mobility" looks like should give *An Honest Living* a read.

References

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