



REFLECTIONS ON RE REFLECTIONS ON REMEMBERING OLIVE

After an absence of some months, on Wednesday 7 October 2009, I am finally able to attend the Remembering Olive Collective's (ROC) monthly meeting at Lambeth Women's Project. I feel pleased that I have come; not only to see the friends I have made and the strangers I will meet, but I am also eager to discuss some important points on the agenda for the evening's meeting. As ROC's ambitions appear to have achieved fruition – the reinstatement of Olive Morris' plaque and photograph on the Olive Morris House in Brixton, the upcoming launch of the Oral History Collection at Lambeth Archives, and Ana Laura's exhibition at Gasworks in December – Ana Laura calls us to reflect on the future of the Collective.

Members, old and new alike, express their experience and opinions of the collective. Pleased and proud, critical and concerned, hesitant and reserved; all that is said is valid. One woman's comments however, strike me. I have found myself withdrawn, she says, this in not my history. Her words resonate with me as they reject me. If Olive Morris is not a part of her history, how can she be a part of mine? Whose history is she a part of? Whose history are we appropriating and why?

As I journeyed home following the evening's meeting, and for days thereafter, these questions continued to unsettle me. They were questions I had asked at my initial involvement in the project over a year ago, but that I had somehow managed to avoid and never fully address.

Then I came upon a quote from Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. "The determining of our multiple identities involves both past and present—memory and imagination as well as present perception"¹ the quote begins. It continues:

In understanding how our past continues in our present we understand also the demands of responsibility for the past we carry with us, the past in which our identities are formed. We are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are.²

Gatens and Lloyd engage Benedict de Spinoza's thought regarding the constitution of the individual vis-à-vis the collective and its implications for our contemporary understanding of responsibility. Through their reading of Spinoza, Gatens and Lloyd

¹ Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, London; Routledge, 1999, p.81.

² Ibid, p.72.

demonstrate that the salient questions I ought to be asking are not to whom does the history of Olive Morris belong, but to what history does she belong? Not whose history are we appropriating and why, but *what* history are we appropriating and *what are we* who are appropriating this history?²

As Gatens and Lloyd explain, for Spinoza, there is but one single entity that can be said to exist in and of its self; that is “Substance,” of which everything else is a mere modification.³ Substance is fully expressed in each of its “attributes” and each attribute consists of “a multiplicity of irreducibly distinct and individual ‘modes.’”⁴ In stark contrast to Western philosophy, Spinoza rejects the view that minds and bodies are separate and distinct and thus causally related. Instead, he views minds and bodies as different but equally complete expressions or attributes of Substance. As such they are “mapped onto one another in a relation of correspondence” rather than causality.⁵ Fluctuations in the powers of the mind correspond to those of their bodies.⁶ Thus the mind can be understood as the idea of the body.

Moreover, for Spinoza, the body, as an attribute of Substance, mediates the power of Substance.⁷ Spinoza views the human body as a composite of simpler bodies. Bodies, communicating motion to one another, synchronise and unite to constitute individuality.⁸ The human body is a centre, a union of parts, of communicating and communicated motion.⁹ The body is not a separate and distinct entity in the material world; it is not self-contained. Bodies are thus profoundly interdependent. And minds, as the ideas of the bodies, are similarly interdependent: “minds are constituted as awareness of bodily modifications—modifications through which we are aware of other bodies as well as our own.”¹⁰ In short, the individual and the collective are dynamically and mutually constitutive. The individual cannot exist without the collective and individuality is not possible in isolation.

Understanding ourselves in this way has important political implications. Spinoza’s individual is not self-contained; s/he does not possess free will. As such, to praise or to blame the individual becomes irrelevant. What is relevant rather is the constitution of individuality: the processes through which the individual and the collective form multiple identities.¹¹

³ Ibid, p.2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p.3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p.13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.12.

¹¹ Ibid, p.69.

Thus, the necessary reframing of my earlier questions: to *what* history does Olive Morris belong? *What* history are we appropriating and *what are we* who are appropriating this history?

The history of Olive Morris, from this point of view, does not belong to my fellow member of ROC, nor does it belong to me. It does not belong exclusively to black British people, to women, or even to Brixton. The history of Olive Morris, while situated in these communities, belongs to a larger political struggle. In accordance with Spinoza's view of the individual vis-à-vis the collective, Olive Morris must be understood as part of a larger whole for "[...] to be an individual [...] is to be embedded in wider social wholes in which the powers of bodies are strengthened and impeded."¹² Olive was a powerful individual. All who knew her describe her as strong, courageous, deeply caring, and determined. She had the power to affect others. However, others also affected her. Moreover, she revelled in her ability to be open to and affected by others, at the same time believing in her own power to affect others and affect change in the world.

In a speech at the launch of the Olive Morris Collection in October 2009, Olive's long-time partner and friend, Mike McColgan, described the ten-minute walk home from Brixton station always taking closer to half an hour with Olive, as she would stop and talk to many people along the way. Mike remembers and appreciates Olive's openness and willingness to engage with those both similar and seemingly different to herself.

In my interview with Hurlington "Hurley" Armstrong for the Oral History project, he reiterates, "the most prominent thing that stands out was how loud she was... It's so important to show her character, she was just there in your face, she could have an argument with you, debate and discuss."¹³ These memories demonstrate the way Olive was able to make connections to, and form relationships with, a diversity of others. In Gatens and Lloyd's words, "Because the similitudes between bodies are partial and multiplex our awareness of other bodies and hence of our own has an inner multiplicity."¹⁴ Olive identified with a diversity of others because she recognized multiple identities in herself.

In this way, Olive appears to embody Spinoza's understanding of the individual vis-à-vis the collective. Moreover, she takes on the responsibility that, according to Spinoza, such an understanding of the individual necessitates. Understanding the individual in Spinoza's terms, that is, an individual, which is constituted by its very embeddedness in collectivities or communities, an individual, which cannot exist in isolation, an individual which does not possess free will; we can understand our responsibility as the result of simply being born in the world.¹⁵

¹² Ibid, p.72.

¹³ Hurley Armstrong interviewed by Rakhee Kewada, 19 August 2009, Olive Morris Oral History project.

¹⁴ Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. Ibid, p.73.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.76.

Accordingly, responsibility, in the words of Hannah Arendt, is “always political.”¹⁶ Likewise for Olive, her responsibility was political. In my interview with Farrukh Dhondy,¹⁷ another former member of the British Black Panthers, he states that Olive:

[...] found determination in bettering the community and instinctively picked up on the fact that this could happen through politics, and that those politics have to be understood. It’s a rare kind of understanding for a seventeen year-old to have and she had it and she was moving forward to do it... and she formed unique relationships. I don’t think anyone else or any other black girl... had the sort of influences that she had.

Similarly, Hurley remembers Olive in comparison to some of the other girls in the British Black Panthers stating, “they were lightweights...but Olive was in there because of the same reason I was, we wanted to make a change, we wanted to make a difference, and we could see where we could make a change and a difference.”¹⁸ Olive believed in her embeddedness in collectivities, in her responsibility to communities, in her ability to act and affect change.

For me, Spinoza’s understanding of the individual vis-à-vis the collective as embodied by Olive herself, has helped me in understanding my own position in the Remembering Olive Collective. Moreover, as Gatens and Lloyd explain, bodily awareness, that is the constitution of individuality, not only depends on the awareness of bodies other than our own, but it also depends on the awareness of bodies that have acted on us in the past. Thus the past sets limits on the range of our possible affects and imaginations.¹⁹ For this reason, we are responsible:

[...] for is the way in which our past endures in our present - both in the form of inherited practices and as memory. How we remember, commemorate or deplore the past matters to our present relations with different others. How we configure the past also matters to the way in which that past is converted into practices and values which will inform our future.²⁰

In Hurley’s words, “It is important to remember someone who cared about other people.” It is important for us to remember Olive.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid, p.75.

¹⁷ Farrukh Dhondy interviewed by Rakhee Kewada, 31 July 2009, Olive Morris Oral History project.

¹⁸ Hurley Armstrong interview. Ibid.

¹⁹ Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. Ibid, p.76.

²⁰ Ibid. p.80.

²¹ Hurley Armstrong interview. Ibid.