



THE MYTHICAL ARC

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The entry of a dead person's papers into an archive can be seen as a sort of second death. There is something symbolic about this particular crossing of the bar, when a collection moves from the private to the public. There is the reverential re-packaging of a once-living and used collection for this new domain; the careful encapsulation of holiday snaps into inert polyester sleeves; the laying to rest of angry newsletters, the minutes of political meetings, and calls for demos against police brutality in a soft bed of archival tissue; the meticulous ordering and numbering, the stamped evidences of a new custody, the drawing up of catalogues, the defining of copyright. Finally there are the new audiences, reading and absorbing the fragments and evidences of a life.

So it was with Olive's papers. There had been a thirty-year gestation before they finally came into the archive. After Olive's death in 1979, her partner Mike McColgan gathered up everything he could find and held them through the 1980s, adding bits and pieces of his own in the process. They were passed on, in turn, to her friend Liz Obi in 2000, and Liz added her own pieces of research and press cuttings. That same year Liz created a small exhibition about Olive using material, from the collection and displayed it at Brixton Library. By 2007, when Ana Laura López de la Torre posed the rhetorical question, "Do you remember Olive Morris?" and unleashed a cyber-storm of reminiscence, research, filming, blogging and parallel collecting, this collection was beginning to acquire a near-mythic status. However, no one apart from Liz or Mike had really yet seen or delved into Olive's papers, now stored in carrier bags in Liz's house; like all Grails this one remained yet unseen. What might it contain? Long-sought and long-contested, would it live up to expectations? Olive's short and public life seemed to promise so much, but had since been largely forgotten. Now, the work of Ana Laura, and what was to become the Remembering Olive Collective (ROC), in reclaiming Olive's memory and significance meant that her archive had become freighted with an almost impossible retrospective significance that was being focused down onto the contents of one box of papers.

Liz Obi was now the owner of Olive's papers and ultimately the decision as to when and where they might be deposited was hers alone. She decided that they should go to Lambeth Archives. At the same time funding was sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund to extend the project into an oral history and archival training programme for ROC members. The logical outcome of this was to make the cataloguing of Olive's papers one of this project's pieces of work. Anne Ward and I, from Lambeth Archives, worked with a group of twelve women from ROC. Over a period of three months we provided basic introductory training sessions about archives and then detailed work on the cataloguing of the collection. ROC members then fully catalogued the collection.

It felt like a very appropriate outcome. All too often local authority archives struggle to collect the papers of recent “political” individuals or organisations; because archives are part of the council they are often perceived as establishment organisations and not the natural or best home for such collections. They are sometimes seen as less capable of responding to the particular inflections of race and gender. The perceived loss of ownership and the distancing that invariably takes place as part of the “professional” archival process of accessioning, cataloguing and storage can also be problematic. Perhaps as a result, many similar collections are being deliberately placed in the growing range of community and specialist archives set up to cater for such collections, like The Women’s Library and the Black Cultural Archives. What the ROC project provided was an opportunity for Lambeth Archives to make the cataloguing and archiving process – all too often a closed, professional activity – a more transparent and a more owned one, by making the walls of the archive porous and by letting ROC take on that professional cataloguing function.

Olive’s papers may be quantitatively small, but that is perhaps to miss the point. Qualitatively what they provide is a roll call of the angry and engaged groupings of her youth, a litany of political, racial and gender oppression. They may be badly printed, crudely designed, mimeographed onto now yellowing and curling, or poor quality paper, yet what this “grey literature”¹ does so powerfully is evoking the complexity and multiplicity of political engagement of South London in the 1970s. Here we find the evidence for an enormous burden of activism and the links between so many interlocking agencies for change: the Black Workers Movement, the Anti-Nazi League, the Brixton Ad-Hoc Committee Against Police Repression, Black People Against State Harassment, the Campaign against Overseas Students Fees, the Organisation for Sickle Cell Anaemia Research, Sussex African Students Association, the Socialist Union Internationalist, the “Scrap Sus” Campaign, “Ban the Jab”, etc. The surviving documents may be fragmentary, but the long list of Olive’s engagements is utterly compelling.

Of course, what the archive also does is reveal the private life of Olive alongside that better known political one. The photographs of her travels and cycling holidays, the university essays, the childhood photos all reveal her human side. This intersection of the political and the personal is perhaps best exemplified by a treasured photo of Olive’s mother at a Trade Union meeting.

The other equally important part of the project involved ROC’s creation of a proactive and parallel archive collection of and about Olive that would support the original archive of her papers. This included: the digital archive of two years of the *Do you remember Olive Morris?* blog and research carried out by ROC members using other archives and libraries, including the Black Cultural Archives, the George Padmore Institute and other bodies, like Olive’s links with Black groups in Manchester during her university years; and the records of ROC itself.

¹ “Grey literature” is commonly defined as documentary material that is not commercially published.

Finally this new collection includes the sound archive of recordings made by ROC members with Olive's friends, family and peers from the 1970s, fellow Black Panthers, members of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), and the various other groups she was involved in or, indeed, helped to found. The occasion awakened the interest of many interviewees in donating some of their own papers; so the ROC archive has acquired new historical content – an OWAAD newsletter here, a Brixton Black Women's Group poster there. This entire parallel archive including the digital sound files and full transcripts of some thirty interviews comprising over forty hours of sound recordings have now been deposited at Lambeth Archives and catalogued by ROC members. These collections are now all open to the public and can be consulted at the Archives.

Ana Laura's starting point was that there was no information about Olive in the public domain. The question that she posed in 2007 has been answered. An awful lot of people do remember Olive Morris, and they have actively contributed their memories, documents and testimony to the project. If you Google her name today, you get a whole raft of hits relating to the work of ROC and associated activities. But my favourite, for sheer crassness, is found among the standard "sponsored links" that advertise people – tracing websites which claim to discover a missing person for a fee. "We Found Olive Morris Current Phone, Address, Age & More. Instant & Accurate", trumpets one.

Turning to the archive, is there not a quiet sense in which these newly catalogued papers, the research and the oral history interviews allow us to find or recover another, fuller version of Olive? The now iconic photograph, adopted by ROC for its logo, shows a passionate woman declaiming into a megaphone. Olive's own papers and the archive of supporting interviews inevitably lead us to a richer, more nuanced and complex person, still angry and unavoidably iconic, but now so much more.