



BEING PART OF BEING PART OF ROC

When I first joined the Remembering Olive Collective (ROC), I didn't really know what I was in for. I decided to come along to one of the meetings because I knew Ana Laura personally, I had browsed through the blog and liked what I read, and because I thought it would be interesting to be part of a women's group. I was curious and wanted to find out more.

After attending my first ROC meeting in January 2009, in which a whole heap of tasks and actions were offered out for people to take on board, I knew I was in the right place. I liked the women I saw, all from different backgrounds and ages, and I also appreciated the group's pragmatic approach to things, that get-up-and-go kind of attitude which I so admire in people. The fact that the ROC women were all so diverse was a breath of fresh air for me. It was great to see that collectively we all shared key values – personified in the figure of Olive Morris and the activism of her times – and yet, individually, we were each very different from one another.

In the context of contemporary identity politics where all ethnic minorities have been splintered into several different sub-categories, being part of an open, all-inclusive group of women who welcomed newcomers, regardless of their ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or faith really mattered to me. As a person of dual African/Spanish heritage, I have found myself engaged in many a conversation where I have tried to explain to people my take on identity politics. For me, it has always been a question of power and not colour. A question of how power is distributed and of who has access to it and the accompanying wealth of opportunities it brings.

In my eyes, there is a clear dividing line between those who have (power) and those who don't, and the bottom part includes all people who suffer the effects of social injustice, most of whom have historically tended to be non-white, but not exclusively. The words and stories of writer and historian Stella Dadzie and activist Linda Bellos, both of whom I interviewed for ROC's Oral History project, clearly illustrate this point.

Stella Dadzie, who co-authored *The Heart of the Race* (Virago, 1985), describes herself as the product of "a strange relationship between an African man and an English woman" which ended in separation. Stella explains how from an early age she tried to make sense of the two worlds she belonged to: her mother's, where they lived on social security and had very little, and her father's world, which was very "African bourgeois",

stating that very early on in life she decided she would “side with the underdog”¹. The underdog in this case was not Stella’s bourgeois African father, nor her working-class English mother but the people in between whose lives were deprived of opportunity.

In the 1970s and 1980s, “Black” was a political term used to denote anyone belonging to an ethnic minority group. However, the term is nowadays used by many people to refer to someone’s skin colour, by virtue of which one is supposed to derive a certain identity and culture. This complicates things even further since the term “Black” in itself bears no clear-cut definition. Commenting on the term BAME (Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic), one of the current forms of ethnic labelling, Linda Bellos said:

Since I know where Asia is, I want to know where Black is. We used to have a term “black” which was inclusive. It was a political term. But if those of us of African origin are now solely being seen by the colour of our skin, it seems to me that that compounds racism.²

Many people – myself included – agree with Linda Bellos’ critique and thus prefer to use the term “African” over “Black” as the former implies a clear geographical reference that points to someone’s origins. When asked about where I am from, I tend to describe myself as Afro-Spanish – not because of my “mixed” features and skin colour but because of my cultural background and experiences growing up – and I actively seek to embrace both sides of my heritage, even though I have never lived in Africa. It is my way of making a stance that both of my cultures are just as important and valuable.

I am very aware of the differences that exist across colour/ethnic lines, but I think we must look beyond these and not fall into the trap of essentialist definitions. By “essentialist”, I mean static, rigid definitions; those that do not take into account the full and complex web of social and cultural factors that determine someone’s identity. So for instance, the idea that all black people – regardless of where they live, which family they were born into, the work they do, etc – are the same is an essentialist definition because it doesn’t take into account the differences that exist between the many African and African Diaspora communities who live all over the world, nor the more personal, individual experiences, which more often than not, tend to be the most crucial formative ones.

On the plane of politics, I believe that if the aim is to fight for justice for *all*, then we must do it in conjunction with other people who share our values and yet respect our differences. In the context of the globalised world we find ourselves in, inter-cultural understanding, differences notwithstanding, is the key to waging any kind of struggle. This is something, which I think Olive Morris’ spirit represented well ahead of her time.

¹ Stella Dadzie interviewed by Sheila Ruiz, 29 May 2009. Olive Morris Oral History project.

² Linda Bellos interviewed by Sheila Ruiz, 12 July 2009. Olive Morris Oral History project.

One of the many interesting things that have come up in the oral history interviews I have done is that Olive was someone who escaped categorisations and personally refused to be boxed in; she was comfortable in her own skin and could relate to people from all walks of life. It seems no coincidence that over thirty years later, the group of women who has got together to remember and pay tribute to her activism is as diverse as Olive's own outlook on life. As different as we all are, we can all identify with her spirit in our own individual way and that is the beauty of it.

Another important value that I think ROC has upheld is that of documenting the history of Olive's life and her fellow activists in their own words, their own terms. This is to some extent an inherent characteristic of the oral history methodology, which we chose to use when creating the archive, but I think it is also a result of the voices we have sought to document. As Stella pointed out in her interview:

I do believe as a historian that it's not for anyone else to tell our history and that if our history is turned into some sort of Hollywood rose-tinted version of itself, then we've only got ourselves to blame. We've got to tell those stories and say, "No, that's not how it was. This is how it was". So by retelling the story of Olive Morris, I think that to some extent we're contributing to that sense of collective consciousness that will see our community through these hard times.³

Being part of ROC has provided me with a real sense of empowerment. I remember interviewing professor Elizabeth Anionwu and her talking about the fact that Olive was very happy and proud when she achieved her degree from Manchester University. I was internally shocked when I heard this because in a way I had idealised Olive Morris so much that in my mind she had become this super-woman who never feared any obstacle or doubted herself. But, of course, that was not the case at all. Olive fought her way through life and never gave up and that is the most important lesson I am taking away with me.

³ Stella Dadzie interview. Ibid.