



# STEPPING INTO

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An early incident in Olive Morris' political awakening begins to demonstrate how she was, as her brother Errol Morris characterised her "a people's person."<sup>1</sup> The common folklore states that on 15 November 1969, at the age of seventeen, Olive, intervened when the police arrested a black man driving a nice car on the streets of Brixton. Olive appears dishevelled in a photograph taken at King's College Hospital after her arrest. Her shirt is soiled, her face swollen. The story of her arrest and the photograph circulate as evidence of Olive's willingness to step into the fray and to do so boldly.

In a newspaper's report on the incident, the man driving the nice car was, in fact, named as Clement Gomwalk, a diplomat with the Nigerian High Commission who'd illegally parked his Mercedes in a no-waiting zone while he and his wife did some shopping. The report goes on to note that six people, not solely Olive, were arrested and charged with "assault on police, threatening behaviour, and possessing offensive weapons."<sup>2</sup>

As the newspaper later reports on Olive's sentencing, "During the melee Miss Morris kicked a police officer and hit him on the jaw." Olive's handwriting on the reverse of the photo tells a different story, not related in the newspaper account: "Taken at about 10pm on 15th Nov 69 after the police had beaten me up." She received a suspended three-year jail sentence that was later reduced to one year suspended.<sup>3</sup>

The details of this event are important, they have come to signal Olive's entry into activism with police abuses of the community as a key feature. Correcting the record to note that she did not in fact act alone, doesn't detract from her bravery in intervening, but instead recasts Olive as an instigator of change. However, one gets the sense from her later activism that Olive didn't seem to care whether people followed her or not. Commenting on Olive whom she knew, Brixton community activist Elaine Holness said, she "didn't mess around" and expected those in struggle with her to "hold the line and deliver."<sup>4</sup> Whether one of six people protesting an arrest or later mythologised as the sole intervener, this story begins to help us understand how Morris approached, in her short time, a life's worth of activism centred on basic human rights. Or as British photographer Neil Kenlock describes it, Olive's "fight for equality."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Errol Morris, 2 October 2007, <http://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com/contribute/#comment-10>

<sup>2</sup> "Callaghan rebukes diplomat," *The Times*, 18 November 1969.

<sup>3</sup> "Girl's sentence changed," *The Times*, 17 April 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Holness comments at *Creation and Liberation: Black Panthers in Brixton*, 3 November 2008, Remembering Olive Collective event at Karibu Education Centre, London, UK.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Kenlock. *Ibid.*