



DIANE WATT INTER

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The following excerpts are from an interview conducted by Sheila Ruiz on 25 September 2009 in Manchester with Diane Watt. Diane knew Olive through her involvement with the Manchester Black Women's Co-op. This interview was transcribed by Julia Morandeira for the Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History project.

Sheila Ruiz (SR): Hello my name is Sheila Ruiz and I am here to interview Diane Watt on behalf of the Do you remember Olive Morris? Oral History project.

Diane Watt (DW): Hello Sheila.

SR: [...] So, can you maybe give me some background about yourself; just talk a little bit about how you got involved in activism, etc?

DW: Well, it was many years ago. I was at one of the local colleges doing secretarial studies and then I bumped into Ada Philips, who was the wife of Ron Philips (Ron Philips being the senior brother of Trevor Philips) and she told me that they were in the process of establishing the Manchester Black Women Co-operative. The Co-operative was going to be providing office skills training to local women. And since I was doing a secretarial course, would I be interested in coming along and be one of the trainers. And that was how I became involved in it; that was my major introduction to community activity.

SR: Great. So you were a member of the Black Women's Co-op; can you remember how it came about, how it was set up?

DW: Well, the Women's Co-operative was really established by Ron and Ada Philips. And so they brought me in initially as an employee, and they came up with the idea because they had carried out a survey of the local labour market, because at that time they were also involved with the George Jackson House. The George Jackson House was providing space for young people, it was like a residential home for young people which they created. And they carried out a survey and noticed that the levels of black people within the employment system, especially in the white collar sector was quite low in comparison with the white community, and therefore they decided to create something which would begin to address that gap, especially in relation to the needs of black women[...]

SR:[...] So, how did you meet Olive, do you remember the first time you met her?

DW: [...] It's a bit fuzzy how I met her, but she must have come into the community, because it was typical of Olive to try to make connections, and I knew she was studying at the University. I either met her in Moss Side or at the West Indian Centre 'cause the West Indian Centre, at that time, was where everybody converged on a Friday night: students, overseas and all the local students would go there, and so it was a big social

event. Between those two places we might have met, I am not quite sure now, it's a little bit vague[...]

SR: So what was your relation to her: were you friends, or just from the Women's Co-op?

DW:[...] I think... Olive came into community because she wanted to become involved with the Saturday School. I knew her, we spoke, we got on Ok, we went to her house when she and Wilma were living together on Aspinell Road, so we had that kind of conversation. But she was just so ahead, politically. That was a bit scary. You kind of close down rather than open up to her because we were in the same age group but she was so way ahead, not just in terms of her activism but also in terms of political knowledge. And I think I stood back, whereas my friend Paula found that so liberating in that sense.

SR: That's interesting.

DW: I mean she didn't do it to overwhelm or intimidate, but it more or less... It was about me and my old sense of inadequacies that made me kind of shut down rather than open up[...] So we had a quite a lot to do with Olive, because she was also a bit of a scream, you know what I mean, she did things that were daring. She had fun, that's another thing: she wasn't so regimental in her thinking that we had to be politically conscious all times and no time for life; she also had time for life and that was exciting.

SR: Great. Can you tell me a little bit about the kind of work the MBW Co-op was doing through its time of existence?

DW: [...] The things that we were doing... Ok, there is providing training and there was a lot of Pan-African activities taking place. The Pan-African movement, the branch in Birmingham, the branch in London, they would come down and have lots of political discussions, group discussions. It was also involved in challenging racism from the National Front, so there were lots of protests taking place.

Also issues around women's health, so like Ada's sister, Kath Locke, because she was another political activist, so it used to be those classes taking place around women's health. We were also very, very aware of the liberation, the liberation struggles that were taking place in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau; those liberation struggles were very, very much high in the agenda and also it was incorporated in the classes of the Saturday School curriculum. And also of course there was South Africa, so it was creating space for those debates and for students from Africa.

Another key thing about the Co-op is that it provided space for students from Africa to become involved in the community and they become involved by being tutors at the Saturday School or coming down for discussion. It was about bridging the gap between the community and the university, and in terms of people, and so in a way it was also about influencing the children that would come into the Saturday School because for many of them this would have been their first experience of being in contact with someone from the university. And also for people like myself who left school, I left school... the main thing was to train as a secretary, I didn't have any aspirations beyond that because I saw that as the limits. 'Cause my parents – again they are from the same period as Olive's parents – their main advice was, "We work in a factory, you work in an office," so I thought, "I have achieved, you know, I work in an office." Only when I became involved in the MBWC, then you hear the voice saying – unlike the voice that you heard

at school who says you can't – the voice that you are getting in the community says you have a responsibility to. And it's through my involvement in community activity that influenced me to get back to education.

SR: So, very empowering...

DW: Yeah, it was extremely, extremely empowering.

SR: And with this Saturday School, how old were the children who were going to it and what was their curriculum, what sort of teaching did they get and who was imparting those lessons?

DW: Children were usually from six upwards, and the teachers were many volunteers, a mixture of community people and university people, as I said. I think the focus was around issues around culture and identity. So, using the three Rs, but placing it a bit in that cultural context. And also I remember we used to have, out of America came a book which talked about, "I want to be: I want to be a doctor, I want to be a teacher." And so we had throughout the place images, positive images, reinforcing images which the young people can begin to see that, "Ok, this is about us." So, even maths and English were on the curriculum, it wasn't the maths and English they were doing day in, day out at school; it was maths and English which enabled them to understand, to engage with their cultural heritage. So, she is looking at the origins of mathematics, where does the role of Egypt stand in those forms of development? So that was what we were doing with the young people. And now we see, I see a lot of adults, and they are talking to you saying "Oh, where do I know you from? Oh, from Saturday School!" We don't remember them, but obviously the organisation must have had such a lasting effect on them that they remember us.

SR: That's great. So was Olive one of the Saturday School teachers?

DW: [...] Olive became involved in the Saturday School. But the organisations... she might have been around then, 'cause we had several transitional periods, she was definitely around when the MBWC was... I am not sure if she was around when we reformed into being Abasindi Co-operative...

SR: Can you just tell me about the kind of activities that Olive would do in the MBWC if any come to mind?

DW: Olive is the type of person that was everywhere, you know, because of the way she operated was ... her life, so it's very difficult to say she's done this, she's done that 'cause she'd incorporate naturally into her life, she didn't have one badge today and then take that badge off and then wear another badge the following day. She was very, very, very committed to issues of social justice, that was very, very clear.

Paula says that lots of the issues she was struggling in talking to Olive made her aware she can be at the same time a person, a woman and also be politically involved; she did not have to create herself in order to please others, and Paula felt this was such an important message. In actual fact she described her as a kind of soldier to her, and that was what she was, one of those few people who was very... an acceptance of self, that she arrived at that stage in life, at such young age, whereby she is not conscious of you judging her because you judging her wasn't part of her script. It was a prerogative but she wasn't gonna make it her agenda or make it something for her to be concerned about. In a sense, it was though

she was seeing through you, it was a little bit overwhelming, she had an overwhelming personality but not in a negative way, in a very positive way.

She spoke the truth, she was a truth teller. Not a gossip, but she wasn't going to make you feel nice, she wasn't going to humour you by telling you things that will inflate your ego at the expense of the truth. And so that is not a very good place to be in, you don't feel it a safe place to be in at that stage. In a sense, she was not larger than life, but life itself. And it's amazing how she coped with contradictions because again she coped with contradictions in a very natural way, because you know, there is Olive, woman black power, and there is Mike, this tall white guy she is going out with. And you think, "My God, how do you deal with it?!" and you are like "Wait a minute". In a sense, the same conversation around race that Olive is going to have with you and I, she is not going to edit it for Mike; he is going to get it the same in the same blunt way. She managed it very well, because she wasn't putting on the show, "This is what I talk when I am on the street, when I am at the community, and this is who I am when I go home."

I remember her once said, and that's stuck in my mind, Mike had a daughter – I think Mike's previous partner was also black – and she said the daughter might have thought that she looked like the house helper, because I think this child thought, I don't think she spent any time in an African country, as far as Olive was concerned, this child seemed to think that people were there to wait up on her. She didn't say it in that context, but this is how she coped with all these domestic contradictions in her life. She was the last person I'd expect to see with a white guy [laughs].

SR: So, did Mike come to Manchester quite a bit?

DW: [...] Yes. She didn't keep him in the closet, he was out there in the open but not in an intrusive manner, he was not one of those handbags that she was presenting at the various things but, if you go to social events in the community you'd see, "All right, that's Mike..."

[...] Olive wasn't scared of her power. Nelson Mandela talked about the greatest fears, "My greatest fears not mean inadequate, my greatest fears mean more powerful". I think Olive wasn't scared of her power, whereas we were afraid of our power and clung to our weaknesses. But eventually there is some of us who said "Ok, let's engage with our power". [...] So much so, that when she died and we went down to London to the funeral... I don't know if it is because I didn't believe – I looked at her too many times in the coffin, put me off for a while because I kept on coming back, and I don't know if it is because I wanted to think, "Is she really there?" and that's the only person I thought, I looked at her so many times afterwards it was a bit odd to look at anybody else in the coffin. I think is probably a sense of disbelief to say, "Is it for real that she is there?" But yeah... that's what it is: fundamentally a very powerful person. And someone that...she was not a saint you know, 'cause she told it as it is. But at the same time...sometimes it was like "Oh, there's Olive, I think I'll disappear," you know, [laughs] 'cause it's like this person is going to see through me so I can't blag it, you can't blag it because she is not coming from that false premise. So unless you are in that truthful state sometimes you just wanted...

But the thing of being malicious and engaging in petty activities, no, you know... I saw Wilma the other day and she was telling me stuff, and you know, we were just laughing at the things Olive did. There was a childish, a child-like element to her, she was engaged... not in malicious activities, but childish pranks, child-like pranks. We've all got the child in us, and I think she didn't kill that in her, she still kept it alive. And it was funny, it was hilarious.

And recently, I've heard of Olive Morris House and I just thought it was a small house. I stayed in Brixton with my friend in March this year and she says "Let me show you Olive Morris House" and I thought, "My God! This is so significant, that is so significant [...]"

SR: Yeah, they named it after her in the 1980s.

DW: It's brilliant! And she was such a Londoner, you know, that accent of hers [laughs].

SR: Did it really stand out that she was from London?

DW: Oh yes, absolutely. She certainly wasn't from Manchester with that accent, she certainly wasn't. That southern accent.

SR: How about in her way of being, or her manners, could you tell that she wasn't from Manchester?

DW: I think, you know the English are very reserved, whether you are from London or wherever, there is a reservedness. Olive fitted very much across Jamaican heritage without speaking... was very clear, big and present, you know what I mean. That element of it, that presence was there, such as, her used her culture to make herself visible. She refused to be invisible. And so she incorporated, she accommodated both cultures very effectively. And that's what made her endearing to different communities 'cause we trying to understand.. [laughs]

She was a bit of an enigma... she occupied, she used her multiple identities very effectively at the time when we still trying to think, "Am I Jamaican? Am I West Indian? Am I...?" She incorporated all of these and made them all relevant and appropriate. She used them according to the situation, so therefore, if she is in the East End of London she can fit in, you know. If she goes to Jamaica, then she draws upon... and is not being comedian, is just being real! 'Cause we've been asked to say, to choose between being black, being African, and she said, "But I am all of those! All of those elements constitute me!" I think she was, as they say, in a very short space of time she had done her bit, 'cause she was only twenty-seven, you know... maybe that was what it meant to be, because today she could have maybe be a baroness [laughs]. Baroness!

SR: Is that how you see her?

DW: No, no [in between laughs]. No, no, no, you know, I saw the other day someone said "Politicians start off as idealists and then they become opportunists." I am not talking about her in that context, but you know society can, because she had such a presence they could try and entice you one way or the other. And so, we never know, at least she ended it the way she loved it, and still be remembered for being involved in the things she loved to be involved. 'Cause so many of us that have been part of that... Trevor Philips was never part of that – he emerged out of that period of activism and benefited from that period of activism, which he fails to acknowledge. Because when he became the president of the National Student Union, there was a period of black activism which helped to shower votes on that level, of people to think, "Yeah, it's ok to have a black person as a president of the Student Union," even though he may think "It was all about me".

SR: One last question, what do you consider Olive Morris' legacy to be or maybe the groups that she was part of, that you were part of?

DW: The legacy still remain an inspiration to women, especially young black women. That's what she means... yes, 'cause she died at twenty-seven, so that's how I'll sum it up.

SR: Ok. Thank you, thank you so much for the interview. That was really enjoyable.

DW: You are very welcome.