



# ON STRATEGIES ON STRATEGIES OF LEARNING:

## IMAGINING SPACE AS A COLLECTIVE

As part of ROC's Oral History project, on 9 September 2009, I interviewed Gerlin Bean, a friend of Olive Morris. She situated Olive in Brixton in the 1970s, within the autonomous collective of young activists that made up the Black Brixton Women's Group, the Gresham School, a black supplementary school that provided a weekend and after-school programme for the community's children, and the Unity Bookshop which was once a volunteer-led bookshop that offered a range of children's books featuring people of colour. Anchored near Railton Road, the primordial home to activist activities in Brixton, these places and groups Olive was affiliated with were amongst others: a printing press, student collectives, self-organised study groups, community-led resource centres, a free legal help centre (Brixton Community Law Centre) and more bookshops. Together, these facilities operated as an informal collective, an investigative device which researched, disseminated and rewrote information – protesting by producing and distributing knowledge.

I do not wish to list these places in an effort to highlight what may be considered a forgotten history to some. Though I am of course concerned with the inadequate preservation of this history – the reality that these spaces may be missing from and need to be written or re-written into the archive, in the way we have done with Olive Morris – I am equally concerned by the inherent assumption that archiving lends a certain validation to histories in ways that the collective memory of a community does not. Obviously, archiving this history is important, as it is through the archive that we should be able to gain access into these places and their stories. But it also seems that by doing this we are admitting that collective memory is simply not enough for the preservation of these histories. Although this may, in fact, be true, I still find unsettling the need to categorise, standardise and collect these histories so that they fit neatly enough within the archive, in our case Lambeth Archives. During our archive tutorial session with Lambeth Archives, for instance, I wondered whether we can really imagine Olive's story when we encounter it in the archive? If not, how can we activate collective memory so it too can adequately store information in a way that is accessible? So instead of attempting an archival practice of my own, I want to discuss the potential of these places, re-imagine the productivity of Railton Road in the 1970s, and by doing so, consider these places as a collective: a collective of resources, a site of learning.

Let's begin by revisiting the issues central to civil rights campaigns in 1970s Britain. To realise the significance of considering activist efforts on Railton Road, as collective places of learning, we must first engage with the power dynamics that produced an environment where alternative strategies of learning might emerge.

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A wave of unjust arrests, unlawful policing, continued lack of housing, limited social and cultural resources, xenophobia, and an over-concern for the standardisation of the public helped to perpetuate an environment in which knowledge and opportunity (and their expectation), particularly for black communities, were inhibited.<sup>1</sup>

I remember seeing a photo of Olive climbing up the back of 121 Railton Road, a flat the she and Liz Obi were squatting, to escape eviction. Other photos showed her having it out with the police, trying quite assertively to keep her place. This struggle to squat – to secure affordable housing in a borough that lacked an effective public housing policy – inhibited social mobility for all by ensuring that some would live without the benefit of a permanent residence; implicitly enforcing the burden of constant physical mobility.

I also saw a photo of Olive, with a swollen face, after being arrested and beaten by Brixton police for interfering while they aggressively forced Clement Gomwalk, the First Secretary of the Nigerian High Commission in London, out of his car and accused him of stealing his own car.<sup>2</sup> This could, and often did, happen because of the “Sus Law,” a stop-and-search law based upon the outdated Sections 4 and 6 of the Vagrancy Act 1824, which allowed the police to stop and search people purely on suspicion, and often without merit. These episodes happened regularly; black men and women were often targeted, harassed and treated like criminals. This unlawful surveillance of the community heightened the danger of one performing or assuming the role of criminal. For example, if one treats a woman as a criminal she is perhaps more likely to become one because she will need to resort to criminal acts to carry out simple lawful activities under oppressive surveillance. Perhaps this is best illustrated with a question: What would have happened if every black man in a Mercedes, or black men in general in Brixton in the 1970s, were treated like Members of Parliament?

Additionally, before the Education Reform Act of 1988, the British state school system embraced a policy of classifying “difficult” students as “educationally sub-normal,” often shortened to ESN. While “normal” was defined by a set of tests and one’s academic performance in the classroom, black children were disproportionately listed as ESN

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<sup>1</sup> As Liz Obi describes, “issues facing black people in 1970s Britain, e.g. police harassment, deaths in police custody, the campaign against the sus law, bad housing conditions and homelessness, issues of injustice in the courts and the prison system, and issues around education and the practice of assessing black school children as educational sub-normal.” Liz Obi, “Remembering Olive Morris” in Deepa Naik and Trenton Oldfield (eds), *Critical Cities: Ideas, Knowledge and Agitation from Emerging Urbanists*, London: Myrdle Court Press, 2009, p.175.

<sup>2</sup> “The Sergeant pulled my hands from the steering wheel and a plain clothes officer hit me on my chest. I was then dragged out of my car and bundled into the Jaguar with two policemen twisting my hands... I was shouting that I did not steal this car and they could telephone the Nigerian High Commission” Derek Humphry, *Police Power and Black People*, Manchester: The Philips Park Press, 1972, p.71.

(similar to the way they are disproportionately permanently excluded from schools within the UK today). Under the tripartite secondary school system, this meant that black children were often sent to “special schools” rather than to mainstream grammar schools and were therefore disproportionately less prepared to attend university. Again, opportunity was systematically inhibited.<sup>3</sup>

The Black Power Movement in Britain penetrated this environment through self-organised protests that took the familiar shape of rallies and demonstrations, but they also initiated reading groups, supplementary schools, self-published and self-owned magazines and bookshops. These spaces on and near Railton Road combated the sense of diminished opportunity by providing housing, informing the community with reading lists, newspapers and leaflets, and by interfering in the curriculum of the public education system through volunteer-led supplementary schools that taught black history, maths and other subjects. Through circularly distributing information (a concept I will return to later) these spaces allowed people to pick up and leave information; to self-educate or cater to one’s learning by oneself.

Though this is not entirely different from the type of everyday observational learning one does when encountering any space, it is important to note that one would return to these spaces on a weekly and often daily basis. These educational spaces were part of some Brixtonians’ routines and were attended as one might attend school. Because of this, these spaces of community organising, campaigning, and enrichment became sites for learning in a way that everyday observational learning was not. This is significant for at least two reasons. The first reason: by positioning these places as a site, we can perhaps more easily imagine them as one space for learning. And the second reason: labelling the collective as a site privileges its role as a resource by suggesting that it houses particular information, similar to the way that sites of archaeological excavations, for instance, can store historical materials, which can in turn reveal information.

Each space or activist group campaigned, organised and worked together collectively. The collectivity I am highlighting here, in imagining a “collective of spaces,” is paradoxically more akin to a school or educational institution where a student or community member is presented with a comprehensive model of learning, and exposed to a variety of experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> “The single most compelling problem within education for black families was the disproportionate representation of black children in ESN schools... Like many other boroughs, Lewisham was placing a ‘fairly high percentage’ of West Indian Children in these schools [ESN special schools] to the dismay of families and the black community.” Joan Anim-Addo, *Longest Journey: A History of Black Lewisham*, London: Deptford Forum Publishing Ltd, 1995, p.124.

Olive, for instance, might have attended Black Panthers meetings on Shakespeare Road, squatted the disused space on 121 Railton Road and volunteered with the bookshop on the ground floor of the building where Brixton Black Women's Group meetings were held. On the same road, she would have read books from their reading list and written for the printing press that produced journals such as *Speak Out!* Olive and her peers would have both created and encountered the busyness of these spaces, had access to different information and experiences through various groups within the same space. Together, these groups, bookshops and community resource centres housed activities that countered the hostility of 1970s South London in differing ways. In doing so they produced an environment where the community, pulled together by their concerns, could consequently share and exchange skills, experiences and knowledge. Here, one could receive a supplementary education, where the curriculum reflected the history of the community and where the community itself determined the standards: a place where students were also teachers and teachers were students and where expectations of opportunity was assumed.

Through these spaces, information was distributed in a circular way: it was produced by the community and learned by the community. Circularity allowed for one to enter into the collective and extract information (by joining an activist group, attending a study group, a community meeting, or purchasing a book from the bookshop) and then add to it (suggest a reading, give a book to the bookshop, write for the self-published journal, help organise a demonstration and so on). In this site of learning one could both access and distribute information.

In my interview with Gerlin, I asked how she felt knowing that some of her fellow Brixton Black Women's group members viewed her as a mother figure. She seemed humbled by this role and explained that although she may have been older, and perhaps more experienced, knowledge was ultimately distributed in a way that allowed for each member to participate, i.e. have the power to receive and distribute information, unlike a mother-daughter relationship that privileges the wisdom of the mother. Together, the spaces near and on Railton Road embodied this circularity that Gerlin alluded to by producing a space where one was presented with several possibilities for belonging and the ability to freely exchange experiences.

### Concluding Questions

Perhaps it is important to end this discussion by making it clear that I do not mean to position activist activities in 1970s Brixton as a collection of spaces in order to nostalgically recall their productivity. It is my hope that by considering them as a collective, we can learn from their productivity, privilege their ability to succeed in their intentions and in doing so imagine ways that alternative education initiatives can supplement formalised education today; education meaning both the learning one does in school, and in our communities.

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In the instance of schools within the State system, might there be a way for us to reproduce this type of circular teaching to better address the supposed need for permanent exclusion from school in the UK? Might there be a way for the community to utilise this method of learning (a collective of spaces that presents opportunities for circular learning) to effectively address issues that affects a student's academic performance before entering the classroom? And within the community, how can we value self-education initiatives so that they co-exist seamlessly with institutionalised forms of education?

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