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Olive and me in the archive: a Black British woman in an archival space

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abstract

This article aims to explore how the archival life of Olive Morris might radically rebuff the devaluation of Black womanhood and identity in Britain. Harnessing a Black feminist framework, I approach Lambeth Archives, where the Olive Morris Collection is found as a therapeutic space. Through an understanding of Olive as complex, I disrupt hegemonic expectations of Black women and propose that within the space of this research, Black womanhood be allowed the freedom of self-definition. In a conglomeration of the documents and voices of the community that remembers Olive, marginalised epistemologies are legitimised. Their sometimes-conflicting accounts generate an unbounded image of Olive as a figure of Black British women's history that harbours meaning as it is mobilised in social consciousness. Incorporating my own auto-ethnographic reflections, I explore the internal and external impact of Olive and my existence in this archival space.

keywords

Olive Morris; decolonise; Black; feminist; epistemology; archive; therapeutic; auto-ethnography; community history

introduction

Black women in Britain are constantly confronted with erasure, their existences endemically and silently denied (Akpan, 2018). As raised across feminist debates, enduring colonialism and objectifying gazes disconnect Black women from their humanity, which remains a quality preserved for white women (Lewis, 2017, pp. 5–7). This is visible throughout academic spaces built upon colonial hierarchies that only value certain types of knowledge. Here, Black women face repeated undermining and critique. Masked by the muzzle of colonialism, their voices are criticised for being over emotional and their bodies are policed whilst appearing unfamiliar within institutionally white spaces (Kilomba, 2016, pp. 15–38). Furthermore, since only 140 of 21,000 UK professors are Black, twenty-five of whom are Black women (Adams, 2020), the academic system is so heavily biased against Blackness that Black silence has become an integral and functioning part of it.

Requiring urgent redress, the obfuscation of Black British voices has been the subject of much feminist work. Black women carry the emotional burden of constantly speaking against injustice and do so in a world that makes them invisible yet hyper-visible at the same time. They are denied the capacity to feel, yet are hyper-sexualised (Lewis, 2017, p. 11). They lack institutional power but face potential and literal threat when they speak out (Collins, 2000 [1990], pp. 124–126). At school, Black girls are given less support in the classroom, yet they are more likely to be excluded than other female students and are viewed as more aggressive and less innocent than their white peers (Akpan, 2019). This lifetime of selective visibility oppresses and undermines Black women, sustaining stereotypes and hegemonic indifference to Black British voices and knowledge productions.

Consequently, it is with indifference that many Black feminists have been met in British feminist spaces. Hazel V. Carby (1982, p. 118) spoke of British white feminists' 'damp' reaction to Black women's calling out of racism, with white women in the British Women's Liberation Movement being 'reluctant to see themselves in the situations of being oppressors'. Lola Young (2000, p. 49) notes white academics' reluctance and embarrassment to address their contributions to institutional racism in the British academy. Elsewhere, when race is engaged with in the British classroom, it frequently centres African American figures of the Civil Rights Movement, leaving students surprised that noteworthy figures of Blackness exist closer to home (Akpan, 2018). Conveniently for white British feminists, it becomes easy to conclude that race and racism are something that happens 'over there'.

Evidently, it is necessary to explore how Black women are defined and valued on their own terms. This article challenges oppressive hegemonic epistemologies by considering the Black British history of South London community activist Olive Morris. Born in Jamaica in 1952, Olive moved to London at the age of 9. Her journey through activism began with the Black Panther Youth League and continued through central contributions to squatters' movements. She left home in her mid-teens, and during her lifetime squatted multiple properties, resisting multiple evictions, and alongside peers contributed to the opening of one of London's first Black bookshops in a house that they squatted.[1] As a founding member of two influential Black women's groups—the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) and the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG)—Olive was known in and beyond her community. While studying for her

[1] The Sabarr Bookshop at 121 Railton Road, Brixton (now closed).

degree in social sciences at Manchester University from 1975 to 1978, Olive was an involved member of the Manchester Black Women's Mutual Aid Group. Sadly, Olive passed away at the age of 27, after a year-long battle with cancer (ROC, 2012, pp. 1–2; Ford, 2016, p. 7). A few years after her death, she was memorialised in the naming of the Olive Morris House by Lambeth Council (Ford, 2016).

But I am left questioning, can a few sentences truly summarise the experiences of a complex—if cut short—lifetime? Olive's existence reaches beyond framings of activism and Black resistance, in the hands of those who have striven to remember her. In 2008, Liz Obi and Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre founded the Remembering Olive Collective (ROC). The ROC would meet monthly to archive Olive's life. The results of their work included an online web resource,[2] the 2009 opening of the Olive Morris Collection at Lambeth Archives and a book titled *Do You Remember Olive Morris?* (Chidgey, 2010). Across this archive, complexity and conflict bore Olive in conversations that resist limiting representations and definitions.

However, Olive's name has become unfamiliar to a younger generation of Londoners (Ford, 2016). Were it not for my dissertation supervisor, Dr Sumi Madhok, I might not even have come across her story. The ROC face an ongoing battle to institutionally entrench the history of Olive (ROC.2, 2019) in a system that is profoundly biased against her. Yet, Blackness does not start and end with erasure; in fact, might we move the discussion beyond this narrative? Though society seems designed to forget Olive Morris, the Olive Morris Collection, as a space of unconventional knowledge production, upholds a lasting and valuable community history with which we must engage.

approaching the archive

Archives exist in dynamic conversation between the past and present through those who maintain and utilise them (Hall, 2001, pp. 89–91). In May 2019, I started what would become a two-month conversation with Lambeth Archives, a small record office and local history library on a green, quiet corner of South London, where the Olive Morris Collection is housed.

Unlike more traditional collections, the ROC has attempted to ensure Olive's is 'textured', self-defined and resists archival standards of knowing (Ford, 2016, pp. 9–11). The collective utilises community history, drawing together thirty-two oral histories of community members who knew Olive, available as audio files and transcripts. Alongside oral histories, the ROC (2012) has accumulated documents from Olive's life and death, including newspaper clippings, photographs, a handful of Olive's own writings and letters of condolence from the years following her death.

To access these items, I impatiently peruse their twenty-five-page catalogue, fill out a request slip for each item of interest and hand it to a member of staff for retrieval. Spread across wallets and files in two cardboard boxes, I occasionally find myself reorganising items to conform to the ROC's intended filing. Used to dealing with, for example, builders asking for the plumbing history of Cowley Road or a small group of local women searching for parish birth records, the in-house staff are relatively unfamiliar with the contents of this collection, and Olive feels pushed to the peripheries of Lambeth history.

[2] Remembering Olive Collective, https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com [last accessed 19 July 2019].

There exist varied and complementary feminist approaches to the reading and re-reading of archives and histories (see Arondekar, 2005; Hemmings, 2013; Karavanta, 2013; Campt, 2017). This article presents my own interpretation of archival material. Using a Black feminist framework, I build upon theorists who harness disruption as a theoretical tool (Young, 2000, pp. 57–58), analyse biography to position the Black self as legitimate epistemology (Mirza, 2015; Kilomba, 2016) and expand upon theory with narratives, reflections and histories (Burin and Sowinski, 2014). I harness my own experience as a mixed-heritage Black woman as a contribution to this knowledge perspective. Whilst researching, I maintain a detailed log of which material I uncover and keep a diary of my experiences at the archive, with notes on how I am feeling, what it means to enter this space and how it resonates with my experiences of the world.

As I communicate this journey to the reader, I gradually combine my own auto-ethnographic[3] narrative into the production and legitimisation of knowledge. I speak of 'I', myself in the archive, and 'we' as shared readers of Olive's life. In generating a conversation with Olive, I eventually begin directly addressing her.[4] Upsetting academic norms, this conversation is intertwined with the regular body of the text as a physical display of the interpersonal and academic unravelling that occurs when Black feminist archival work is conducted. Inevitably, the archive becomes a therapeutic space within which the internal and external ramifications of oppression begin to be deconstructed (Burin and Sowinski, 2014).

Olive and me in the archive

Mixed up in the outlines of Olive's life, I begin my search through the Olive Morris Collection at random, and pull up documents, old textbooks and pictures. I am unsure what is of importance and what is not. I end my first day disappointed and lost. I reflect:

> I felt hopeful that some golden secret would be revealed to me. Perhaps in my own bias I was searching for some kind of 'authentic' knowledge and experience, something that might reveal a true sense of Black British-ness to me. But what I really found, was not that much. (Diary entry, 23 May 2019)

Stumbling over my own naive hopes, my deflation is evident. Yet reading this entry, I begin to consider my own complicity in the perpetuation of hegemonic ways of knowing Blackness. Engaging Olive solely with the hopes of proving a point about authentic Black activism in defiance of the oppressions of whiteness risks affirming stereotypes that expect Black women to be 'superstrong', tolerant and resilient, whilst stripped of the freedom to be weak, soft or banal (Kilomba, 2016, pp. 125–126). Such stereotypes permeate my own consciousness and without naming prove challenging to move beyond. Inevitably, whatever I sought that day could not so simply or hastily be found. So why the haste? The complexity of Olive's identity will take time to construct, and I face no obligation to rush to unravel whiteness with Black resistance (Ahmed, 2007, p. 165). Hence, I decide to face the archive with freedom in mind, and allow the archive to speak its truths to me, as opposed to speaking my fears to the archive.

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[3] Auto-ethnography is a self-reflective writing technique; it connects personal reflections to broader social arguments and understandings (Ellis, 2004).

[4] I note how Gail Lewis (2009) talks to her mother in a hypothetical literary space, allowing her a more open and honest dialogue than she would have been able to have in person were her mother still alive.

I return the next day and start reading Olive's schoolbooks from her days at Manchester University. Turning the pages of her neat, handwritten workbooks, I settle on a page in which she's learning Chinese scripture. She writes: 'The vowel sound is written in after all the outline is completed' (Morris, 1975–1978). I consider how applicable this note is to her own archival life. As a figure who is no longer with us, Olive is defined in the present through her physical absence, written in once her life has been completed. In grappling with these outlines of her life, as time and familiarity progress, the remnants of Olive become louder and more distinct to me. A Jamaican-born woman who grew up in Britain, a squatter with a degree from Manchester University, a woman with a long-term white-skinned partner and a woman who during this time had intimate relationships with other men and women (McColgan, 2009). In her, we are connected to understandings of Black womanhood that encompass multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities. In this archive, there is a wave of knowledge and material, pushing back popularised and limiting framings of Black British identity. It is an epistemology that shows us that, rather than succumb to erasure, Olive has continued to hold space for us to learn.

This challenge is heard across voices of the archive, as people share their memories of Olive. For instance, I come to a transcript of the ROC's interview with Mike McColgan (2009), Olive's friend and partner of almost a decade. He shares that Olive was known for her bravery and recounts that at a protest in the mid-1970s, Olive and friend Liz Obi[5] ran from the larger demonstration to confront a group of National Front members holding abusive placards, 'ripping the placards from their hands' (McColgan, 2009, p.7) without any hesitation. Mike notes his fear in contrast to their bravery: 'Olive and Liz were whoosh! Like this, they were off "you bastards, you!"'. They simply would not have stood by and allowed this group to intimidate them, no matter the threat they posed (*ibid.*). Yet, Olive's cries were cut short.

As we delve deeper into these transcribed oral histories, we learn that Olive did not let bravery obscure her fears. Judith Lockhart—who met Olive as a member of the BBWG and OWAAD—expresses her concerns for Olive to the interviewer. Judith tells us that after her diagnosis of non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 1978, Olive was angered by the possibility of her life ending in its youth. It scared her: 'She'd lost a lot of weight and she came out of bed and she was, I think, walking back out with us ... and she just kept saying, "I don't want to die ... I'm too young to die" ... She wanted to make one last trip' (Lockhart, 2009, p. 34). Her pain almost audible: Olive had more to give.

I return to Mike's interview, where he recalls her time in hospital:

> You see her in the ward, it was amazing, being there, all of a sudden she'd get out of bed, start walking down the ward ... she said: 'Hello Mrs Johnston, how are you doing? Do you want a cup of tea?' ... 'How about you love? Shall I pull your blankets up?' She was ... like a nurse walking around, it was unbelievable. (McColgan, 2009, p. 16)

Even in these vulnerable moments, we are reminded that Olive's fear of dying was in flux with her drive to fight bravely for others. Both strong and at moments fragile, she was complex. Her personality bursts over the sides of these tales as she lives in the archive, immersed in the multiplicities of her own, and

[5] Liz Obi was a close friend of Olive and a fellow activist. She began bringing Olive's life together in a personal archive around the early 2000s (ROC, 2012, pp. 1–2).

others', identities. As such, though in her death she continues to face fears of erasure and discrimination, in the voices of this archive that have striven to remember her, Olive's existence reaches beyond such challenges. The Olive Morris Collection speaks her back into life and commands that we recognise her presence in a tangible, human way.

Of course, though she commands our attention, Olive's humanity is not determined by our approval. As I spend more time in the archive, I realise that Olive was stabilised by her own self-acceptance. She told one friend that of her complex personality, 'All of those elements constitute me!' (Watt, 2009, p. 5). Inevitably, some found Olive's energy intimidating. In one transcript, Diane Watt (*ibid.*, p. 3) remembers that Olive '… told it as it is … sometimes it was like "oh, there's Olive. I think I'll disappear." [laughs] Cause this person is going to see through me, so I can't blag it'.[6] In fact, Diane felt she left such a presence that she had to check Olive's casket multiple times in disbelief: 'I looked at her so many times! Afterwards I didn't want to look at anybody else in a coffin' (*ibid.*). Clearly, Olive was a force to be reckoned with. Her self-certainty indeed caused discomfort in some. It fundamentally challenged conceptions of what society deemed one could and could not be as a Black woman: conceptions that we need exist in the violence and insecurity of otherness, in a society that pines for our invisibility and undermines our credibility. Yet, in all the ways that she existed, Olive caused revolutions in people. Olive's brother Basil describes the traffic in South London on the day of her funeral as coming to a 'standstill', that people came to memorialise her 'by the coach load' (Morris, 2009, p. 23).

Sharing in these memories, we are challenged to question hegemonic limitations upon Black identities, and to regard Blackness with confidence and complexity—a complexity that is sustained by a community that mourns for her loss. So I wonder, how can this impact be forgotten? Indeed, though erased in mainstream institutions, Olive does not erase herself. Her fiery existence has left a lasting impact on her peers, and imprints a vibrant and passionate impression onto me. Valuing this knowledge that we find in the archive, Olive's existence and presence goes unquestioned: it is an existence that continues to disrupt sustained, simplified and stereotyped definitions of Black women, even those that I hold myself.

from personal to collective

Once we see this archive as a valuable space of knowledge production, it becomes important to understand its way of knowing and how it revives Olive Morris in the fragmented tales that it encompasses. I think of this archival collection, and recognise those who undertook labour to maintain its history. I think of what they have shared, and what they have lost.

Gerlin Bean, co-founder of the Brixton Black Women's Group and a close friend of Olive's (ROC, 2012, p. 18), shares an emotional interview with the ROC. She describes giving them her personal collection of photographs and memories of Olive, having kept items with her across travels between Jamaica and England over the past forty years: 'I feel now I am letting go of Olive, so I can give it to the archive' (Bean, 2009, p. 13). Mike McColgan also donated items that represented his personal connection to Olive. He recalls handing his collection to Liz Obi: 'Letters, and leaflets, photos and so on, and I gave … a lot of them to Liz under the firm undertaking that they would be restored to me, but I've never seen them back since, but

[6] Watt met Olive as a member of the Black Women's Coop (ROC, 2012, p. 19).

they're now part of … the Archive so …' (McColgan, 2009, p. 21). I'm left with a bittersweet taste. Both have shared their personal collections of Olive, physically and verbally, such that she might be reformed in the archive. It is a sacrifice that allows other people to partake in Olive, to hold her in a different way, and subject her to new uses and values. Yet this process of transference, from an individual to a shared existence, from a bordered person to a collective body, is necessary for legitimising the collective existence of Black women in Britain. As Gerlin goes on to mention of her donations to the archive: 'I know that it will be safe [...] people can perhaps here, relate to it more' (Bean, 2009, pp. 13). This archive was meant for sharing. Built out of multiple voices, it counters the individualising nature of racial marginalisation in Britain. Combining these narratives destabilises the boundaries within and between subjects, generating possibilities for collective address whilst celebrating collective identity. Gerlin feels that Olive will be safe here, spread across this archival space, open and available for the community to delve into. It is a deep dive in which I participate, piecing these stories together under my own gaze.

Moving through this history, I look for patterns and themes that are spread across the material, mutterings of memories that might reinforce one another. With much organisation and note-taking, it becomes possible to accumulate moments that recur. One such moment emerges in the telling and re-telling of an incident in which Olive comes to the aid of a Nigerian diplomat being arrested on the streets of Brixton. I hold a weathered photocopy of a news article titled 'In remembrance of Olive Morris' (Tajo, c. 1979), published in a Nigerian news outlet following her death. It mentions the story of Olive saving a diplomat, and expresses hopes that she will be memorialised alongside the Malcolm Xs and Marcus Garveys of historical Black rights movements. Olive made not just local but international news! I think of how Nigerian readers would be impressed by this tale. I myself feel proud of her courage, as I battle to find more information about what happened.

I come to pages of a book preserved in the collection that further illuminate my understanding. On Saturday 15 November 1969, Nigerian diplomat Clement Gomwalk and his family went shopping in Brixton. They parked their white Mercedes outside of a popular record shop on Atlantic Road. The police—suspicious that their car was stolen—harassed Mr Gomwalk, refuted his diplomatic status and eventually physically dragged him from the wheel to beat him (Humphry and John, 1972, pp. 71–73). During his brutalisation, a crowd gathered and police reinforcements were called, at which point 17-year-old Olive pushed her way through the crowd to his defence, attempting to stop the assault. Olive was then arrested and herself suffered the brutality of the police (Tajo, c. 1979). It is a rousing and uncomfortable example of Black experiences in Britain, and generates an image of Olive as a hero of Black Power activism—a teenage girl fighting for the dignity of an adult male official (Ford, 2016, p. 12).

As more archival material is brought together, the spread of this story continues; it permeates oral histories, newspaper articles and letters of condolence (Fernando, 2000). Yet, what begins to become apparent is that multiple versions are told of what happened that day (Ford, 2016). For instance, I am surprised and somewhat dismayed to find that Mr Gomwalk's personal account of the incident, settled in a copy of the *Black Power Newsletter* (c. 1969), does not mention Olive at all. He was dragged from his 'new white Mercedes car by police, accused of stealing it, punched, elbowed in the groin and handcuffed for over an hour' (*ibid.*). I consider her erasure under Gomwalk's gaze. Maybe Olive wasn't important to him. Or perhaps amidst the complicated gendered and class-based dynamics of the situation, he omitted her in embarrassment: an uncomfortable yet all too familiar conclusion for Olive.

Disheartened, I delve back into the archive, looking for Olive's voice between all of these tales. With patience, I find it reproduced in a police statement taken after the clash. In Olive's words, she arrived at the scene after the diplomat, when the police had 'just dragged off a Black man into the meat wagon'. It was in the process of verbally protesting the arrest of her friend Steve that she was subsequently arrested. She was then racially abused, assaulted at the police station and badly beaten (Morris, 1970). Olive's testimonial of the event is again different from what other materials have led us to believe. It seems Mr Gomwalk and Olive did not even meet. Though unaware of their coexistence, their tales have been interwoven as they have moved into the hands of the communities that speak of them. To Black communities across the diaspora, Olive inadvertently became a reason to have endured the suffering of the incident and an icon with which to make sense of the broader violence they faced.

Unwittingly, in my journey to weave together components of the archive, hoping to strengthen my grasp on stories, I have simultaneously unwound strands of Olive. Yet, does this unwinding weaken her impact? I begin to consider the consequences of these undefinable and messy histories, the necessity of allowing space for these non-definite truths. Evidently, in these shared epistemologies we are again reminded that Olive is difficult to define, that this knowledge is not straightforward. So I consider—as perspectives are shifted, tales converge and diverge—that Olive's meaning and power will inevitably present in different ways. I return to examine the oral histories of Olive's close friends. Inevitably, discussions of her illness, deterioration in health and eventual death are prevalent in many. As I tentatively handle their accounts, these changing meanings become increasingly apparent.

When interviewed by the ROC, Gerlin Bean (2009, pp. 5–6) spent time recounting her experience of Olive's sudden deterioration in health: 'She's always messing around and laughing and carrying on, and then she starts rolling around on the floor, and said: "oh, such a pain". And I said: "Olive stop messing around" and she said: "no, I really have this pain"'. They urgently took a taxi to King's College Hospital: 'we went and then they told her, you know what they told her? That she has gas [laughter], and they gave her some tablets and things and said go away'. But the pain persisted, and it was only after some time that they discovered the true cause of her illness, non-Hodgkin lymphoma (*ibid.*).

Sandra Hurst (2009, p. 9) provides the ROC with an alternative framing. When asked how Olive's illness started, Sandra centred it around a day in which Olive climbed on top of a bin whilst trying to get into the window of her house 'and she fell off the bin, and she said when she got up she knew that something was wrong, that something had changed'. [7]

Elsewhere, Olive's partner Mike tells us that her illness initiated around a cycling holiday they had in Spain. Early on in the holiday, Olive began to complain of physical pain in her back and exhaustion in her legs. Cutting the holiday short to return home, 'we had to accept that she couldn't [...] that was the first sign really that she was very ill, she went to hospital, I think King's College hospital and they sent her home saying, oh she was imagining it'. It was not until around September 1978 that she was properly diagnosed. By July 1979 she had passed away, aged 27 (McColgan, 2009, p. 5).

Through these distinct oral histories of Olive's declining health, it becomes difficult to seek a definitive answer as to what happened to Olive Morris in the time leading up to her death. Indeed, there is not one account around which we can imagine her story. As material is amassed from the archive, it displays

[7] Sandra knew Olive in the 1970s (Hurst, 2009).

natural and inevitable variation in memory and meaning, revealing histories that are always dynamic and contextual (Gedalof and Puwar, 2012, p. 4). To attempt to certify the most truthful of these truths would be to deny and delegitimise the multifarious nature of this community testimony. These memorialised and retrospectively imagined tales seem so possible, so visible, as they continue to circulate around Olive.

During an interview with Olive's brother, Basil Morris, the interviewer recounts hearing a rumour that Olive was seen playing dominoes at a local social club. The interviewer asks, 'Was she a domino person—do you know?'. Basil responds, 'Not that I know of, but, yeah, I could just see her doing that, yeah' (Morris, 2009, p. 22). Olive's image is generated as her brother and the interviewer speak this rumour into life. He can picture her here. Indeed, even I can see Olive playing dominoes at the social club. For what is wrong with generating fantastical tales of Olive Morris—saviour of political diplomat, player of dominoes—when such images serve to strengthen and empower communities? In the freedom of uncertainty, Olive's image becomes exponentially powerful.

Really, how else could we have understood Olive? Had we sought to translate her into a system unquestionably designed around the outlines of someone richer, whiter and more male—into moulds and traditions that favour fact and coherence over emotion and meaning—we would have left parts of her behind: whittled her into disappearance and softened the sounds of her memory. From the vantage point of institutional exclusion, the world looks very different. The Olive Morris Collection presents histories that are for sharing, that render Olive unbounded and interpersonal, a figure that might move through the imagination of Black British communities in multiple, valuable ways. As such, Olive's narrative is not one of individual Black exceptionalism, but of collective existence and shared legitimacy. Notably, amidst her life, death and re-living, the archive generates a *feeling of Olive*, a sense of her with which I will re-imagine my own existence and empowerment, beyond the veil of academic approval.

speaking to Olive in the archive

As I come to this realisation, the importance of continuing to hold Olive's image as an unbounded moment of Black British history becomes increasingly apparent to me. In this journey through the archive, I build my own conceptualisation of Olive, that I as a Black British woman choose to mobilise in writing. Inevitably intertwined with her tale, I 'speak' to Olive as I symbolically understand her, as I centre my own testimony and intentionally alternate from a conversation with the reader *to a conversation with Olive*. I undertake an archival therapy that challenges internalised understandings of Black womanhood, deconstructs hegemonic expectations of knowledge and embraces self-acceptance.

As a racialised body in Britain, I experience melancholia, an unconscious and internalised sense of loss stemming from the denial and erasure of my existence (Eng and Han, 2000). Inevitably, as I write about the representation of Black British women, I write through my own involvement with this relationship to loss. I seek the answers and groundings to my own identity in my (sub)conscious refusal to conclude that the Black woman's academic and historical invisibility is legitimate. I land on this realisation at the junctures of Olive's identity, and as I look so deeply through her life, I am struck that:

> ... I'm not really sure if this is about Olive, or about me. (Diary entry, 23 July 2019)

Whilst immersed in Olive's narrative, my own is revealed alongside it. I too become subject to the revolutionary power of Olive. Inextricably caught between my own intent and my understandings of Olive

through the collectively formulated archive, I begin to evaluate how I identify and seek meaning within her and this space.

In many ways, archives can be considered as living through the individual bodies and voices that interact with them (Digital Women's Archive North [DWAN], 2017, p. 2). Hence, I myself become a part of the archive, and I participate in its life and re-living. As I rifle through the archive, pages take flight in my imagination. I learn through the oral history of Gerlin Bean how Olive, Gerlin and other sisters of the BBWG would dress up and go out to blues parties every Saturday. They would laugh and have fun, drink beer and dance together (Bean, 2009, p. 7), and I reflect:

> I picture them there, in the bars, the dimly lit blues clubs of Brixton, I want to join in, steeped in nostalgia for a memory that is not my own. (Diary entry, 25 July 2019)

Judith Lockhart (2009, p. 36), a sister of the BBWG, shares with the ROC that Olive made it 'her business, you know, to make it possible for people to identify with her', and I find myself doing the same. I look into my mind and Olive is there with me. Hence, as I meet Olive in the archive I picture her as my friend. We dance, we disagree, we are sisters. My strong connection to Olive, to the archive, my nostalgia for her history and memory, is indicative of the nature of Black identity. The haunting of Black bodies, past and present, our slavery metaphorical whilst our historical and academic death tangible (Powell, 2016, p. 257). I am so irrevocably tied to these tales because, in parts, these tales are mine. As I encounter this archive, I replace the histories of erasure that have haunted my own body with histories of Black community. It is nostalgic to meet Olive here so simply, to encounter her everyday humanity, because it is a humanity I have always known, but that has been consistently denied to me. In this archival life of multiplicity, I am powerfully allowed to identify myself, as a Black woman, as a human and as a living carrier of Black British history.

Yet still, I battle between invoking this legitimacy and succumbing to the oppressions of this institutional archival space. I have heard the archive's truths and again I speak to it my fears:

> I feel out of place in this archive, an unfamiliar space ... I am embarrassed to ask questions, I feel like an imposition and a burden. I note that I am asked not [to] use a pen and to place all my belongings in the locker, there is nowhere to fill up water so I can only drink the water that I bring (and only in the corridor). (Diary entry, 23 May 2019)

Embedded in an arena of knowledge, this archive is an institution and mechanism orientated around whiteness and white bodies. My embarrassment to exist in this space is not necessarily the doing of any individual actors of the Lambeth Archive, or of its location or building, but a reflection of the enduring habit of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007, p. 160)—a habit which has purposefully and systematically used archives to erase, alter and obscure histories of Blackness and empowerment. Inevitably, entering into a space in which Black Britons have traditionally faced such violence is daunting. I carry with me the traumas of constantly arriving as visible in these spaces, of never feeling the ease of seeing myself reflected in the stories and faces around me. Of risking hostile gazes. Of burning in discomfort. So, I do everything I can to go unnoticed, make myself small, adhere to the rules, and maybe my difference will not feel so stark. I really begin to contemplate: how does this archive carry Olive? How can it possibly hold her with care? This feeling rests with me overnight. I return the next day to ask the archivists if they are familiar with the Olive Morris Collection. I am told that as it was catalogued by the ROC, those employed

at Lambeth Archive do not themselves know much about it. With anxious desperation, I return to my notes, where I begin to consult Olive as an author of this research:

> And how do you feel about it Olive? (Diary entry, 24 July 2019)

A stranger here in your house, used and interpreted by comers and goers like myself, projecting realities through and onto you that may not be your own.

I implore you to answer, Olive. How do you feel about it? Can you hear me?

Inevitably, definitive answers are difficult to formulate here. Yet by returning to the oral histories, I begin to piece together an impression of Olive's response.

Olive expressed frustrations about her peers thinking of activism in conventional ways. She wanted to discard political allegiances and 'look at things afresh' (McColgan, 2009, p. 9). It is clear that Olive was resistant to the state—in fact to government in any guise. When the BBWG applied for and were granted state funding to grow the Sabarr Bookshop,[8] Olive protested that it would be their 'downfall' (Bean, 2009, p. 3).

Such sentiments are echoed in the words of her brother, who expresses his apprehensions as to the means through which Olive has thus far been remembered. Largely, he refers to the disjuncture between the naming of Olive Morris House in 1986 and the subsequent uses of the building as Lambeth Civic Centre,[9] an institute that Olive might have perceived as oppressive to local people: 'Olive stood for ... oppressed local people, especially when they were being oppressed by the local authority ... I'm not sure that would go down too, too good [with Olive]'. Basil tentatively suggests that Olive might demand to have her name removed from it if she could (Morris, 2009, p. 28). My impression of Olive's clear disapproval of conventional state mechanisms leads me to consider that she would not want to be here—that she would not want to call the Lambeth Archive, an institution of Lambeth council, her home.

Do you agree, Olive?

Of course, having looked to the archive as one of the most apparent places in which Black British histories might be addressed, I consider:

> What choice do we have but to play along with this institution in order to get her recognized ... ? We must fit you in this space or else we risk you being forgotten. I must fit in this space or else I risk being forgotten. (Diary entry, 24 July 2019)

My understandings from Olive to myself collide around our spatial recognition. I write with growing urgency whilst institutions such as these maintain and entrench the ignorance to and erasure of Black womanhood (Kilomba, 2016, p. 34).

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[8] The bookshop initially operated on a voluntary basis, but upon gaining funding the volunteers were transformed into managers and employees (Bean, 2009, p. 3).

[9] Though now relocated upon plans to demolish Olive Morris House, the Lambeth Civic Centre was a place for local people to make enquires about council tax, benefits and other state allowances.

Are we seen in this space, Olive?

I hold her in the pages and documents of the archive. I reproduce her image in my academic research. I am scared. Scared that she is not known here, that her history is not valued here, that I am not valued here.

I am scared to lose you, Olive, though I never really had you, though I turned to this place to find you, I do not want to leave you here. So needing am I to hear your words, so deprived of my history and legitimacy, that I hold you so tightly, afraid to let you go.

As I grapple with my own anxieties, as I speak aloud to Olive in my urgency, at last, Olive answers:

I am not forgotten; I have not forgotten myself …

I am Olive Morris, I am strong in life, I am weakened by death and I am glued back together in all the wrong places. I am my own voice, I am a collection of voices, I resist and I conflict, it is beautiful.

Do not mistake my existence in this space for defeat, I triumph this place as an undefined definition of a Black woman. We transcend these walls, we refute this institution; in our presence here we disrupt its oppression.

As I converse with Olive, I am reminded of her powerful self-acceptance: there was 'something about Olive that was so uncompromising' (Dadzie, 2009, p. 8) that she challenged and caused discomfort in those around her. Speaking to Olive in the archive, I challenge foundational understandings of my own identity—I break down the internalised constraints of socialised oppression and form myself again. I am immersed in my own sounds, defining my own framings, in a radical revaluing of the Black self. In such development of Black British feminist archival consciousness, the archive becomes a space of healing and empowerment: a therapeutic space that reveals the women and histories that predetermine our existence in the present (Burin and Sowinski, 2014, p. 118), the mediators of my relationship to history. I unearth a passage from the 1972 *Black Power Newsletter*, written as a call to Black women to join a meeting happening later in the week: 'There can be no Black liberation without the liberation of Black women—but there can be no liberation of Black women unless we struggle to liberate ourselves—who else will do it for us?' (*Freedom News*, 1972). It's a request that I cannot ignore. In this therapeutic space, I work through my discomfort until it no longer feels so uncomfortable. As I become more and more familiar with Olive, as I mobilise her figure as a legitimising image of my presence, I begin to redetermine my own existence inside and outside of these walls. I become an actor of Black feminist disruption (Young, 2000, pp. 57–58) as I claim territory within this institution. I spend days in the archive, I sit on its steps and share my lunch with its litter, I call my mum, I express my stresses, and the whispers of my voice echo off its walls. I speak through thoughts in the archive. In the archive I grow and evolve.

Riding the waves of memories of Olive, crashing and colliding, overlapping and conflicting, I define Black womanhood in the absence of a definitive definition. Black women have been here, Black communities

[10] The DWAN (2017, p. 160) manifesto for feminist archiving challenges the reader to add to the archive, write in the margins, make noise, move around and 'USE PEN'.

have been here, we have existed and we will continue to exist. Envisioning a future in which I am allowed the uninhibited freedom of this humanity, I ask:

What now, Olive?

Awaiting this reality, I settle for championing my own experience in the archive. As I understand more of Olive, so Olive understands more of me. My discomfort is eased. I assert my presence in the archive, I begin to fetch documents myself, I keep my water under my desk, and, occasionally, I take my notes in pen.[10]

conclusion

Between Olive and me in the archive, my understandings of a Black woman in an archival space were formed and re-formed. Speaking my worries to the archive, and posing my urgencies to Olive, I allowed the archive to talk back to me my transformation, in a radical revaluing of Black selfhood. Presented with a collective epistemology that does not beg the system for approval, but instead generates its own parameters, might this empowerment be sustained? I conclude this archival journey at the beginning of my own narrative, caught in a moment of reflection upon Olive and myself, our sufferings and our lives as Black women. Attempting to hold on to our meetings and musings. Attempting to share them. Irrevocably open to these simultaneities and uncertainties, I wait. For if Olive has saved me from drowning in erasure, I still await the day my feet are safe upon dry land.

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