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A Memorial Garden for David Oluwale: Who? Why? And how? MAX FARRAR

When the writer Caryl Phillips said there should be a memorial to David Oluwale, the British-Nigerian hounded to his death in Leeds in 1969, my first thought was a plaque or perhaps a statue. The memorial committee that I put together quickly adopted a different approach. Mahalia France suggested that David should be remembered in a more positive way, in a form that encouraged people to think and to play. Mahalia's father, Arthur France MBE, had attended the trial at Leeds Crown Court in November 1971 of the police officers accused of killing David; she had grown up in a family where activism moved at the blink of an eye from confrontational Black Power to the multi-cultural conviviality of carnival. The Memorial Garden for David Oluwale that is now being created will express the vivid mix of ideas and practices that the post-colonial populations of Leeds have stimulated. This article aims briefly to tell David Oluwale's story, to explain why we are making this garden, and to outline the intricate process we have undertaken to make it happen.

Who was David Oluwale?

Around the trial in 1971 of Inspector Ellerker and Sergeant Kitching, the policemen accused of the manslaughter of David Oluwale and causing him actual and grievous bodily harm, a member of the Leeds Afro-West Indian Brotherhood painted REMEMBER OLUWALE in huge white letters on the Yorkshire stone wall on Chapeltown Road, at that time the heart of the populations of African,

Caribbean and South Asian descent. Reading this at the time I was mindful of the power of political graffiti. As a keen reader of the magazine *Race Today* I soon learned from Ron Phillips, the British-Guyanese writer, what the trial revealed.¹ Ron Phillips summarised the record of extreme brutality unleashed by Ellerker and Kitching on the hapless body of a black man by this time reduced to sleeping rough in the centre of Leeds. He noted that the trial judge directed the jury to acquit on the manslaughter charge, arguing that the identification evidence was not satisfactory. (Ellerker and Kitching were merely convicted of causing actual bodily harm and sentenced to 36 and 27 months respectively.) At a time of widespread and systematic racism, Ron Phillips expressed a common view among political activists: ‘If the entire society defines a group as a threat, then the police forces have a vested interest in reducing that threat by a positive policy of attack.’² No doubt the fear of libel stopped Phillips from stating the view that these officers killed David Oluwale. As subsequent research showed, it was the view of Chief Superintendent Perkins, the lead officer in the investigation into Oluwale’s death, that his Leeds’ colleagues had murdered David Oluwale. Searching for light in those dark days, we note that Perkins’ scrupulous enquiries were triggered by an officer with a conscience. Police Cadet Gary Galvin had told his superiors that he believed Oluwale had been killed by these officers. Several of his contemporaries gave evidence against their bosses in court.³

When Caryl Phillips, born in St Kitts but raised in Leeds, published his 2007 text on Oluwale, he too concluded that Ellerker and Kitching were killers.⁴ This multi-layered piece starts with a fictional encounter between a young black woman and David Oluwale on Chapeltown Road some time at the end of the 1960s. While Phillips adopts other styles in the text, including interview transcripts and facts about the history of Leeds and its many incoming populations, this short fictional segment provides pointers for the way that the David Oluwale Memorial Association (DOMA), a charity registered in 2012, does its work of making memory.⁵ One point we stress is that there is much that we don’t know about David Oluwale, and some ‘facts’ in the published

record are actually fictions.⁶ Another is that Phillips presents Oluwale as a man who is as much marked by his social status (destitute) and his poor mental health as he is by his skin colour; a man who, nevertheless, maintains his dignity and agency in this encounter with a black schoolgirl. Overall, Caryl Phillips builds a picture of David Oluwale who, in the early 1950s, doing hard and dirty labour for industries rebuilding themselves after the war, rebuked factory foremen who treated him badly. (David never ‘learned the rules’, one of his friends told Phillips.) In the late 1960s, transfigured by nearly ten years in psychiatric hospitals, subjected to largactyl and electro-convulsive ‘therapy’, Phillips shows that David was defiant of those brutal officers, always returning to his preferred doorways in the centre of Leeds, despite the beatings, despite being urinated upon and rolled down the road in a dustbin, despite being transported miles out of Leeds in the night and dumped ‘in the jungle’. DOMA therefore refuses to paint David Oluwale as a victim, despite the extreme victimisation to which he was subjected.

Why must he be remembered?

The basic reason for remembering David Oluwale is a familiar one. The aftermath of British imperial domination (in this case of Nigeria) took many different forms, and one of them, the migration of those facing destitution in the colony, so poor that they stowed away on packet ships, produced a layer of new migrants whose stories have hardly been told.⁷ By erasing or ignoring this history, the woes of Empire are not fully understood. The Remember Oluwale charity makes the specific and local point that arises: the city of Leeds must acknowledge what, at its kindest, amounts to gross negligence towards this black citizen. We question whether he was actually mentally ill when first sent to hospital in 1953 — it is very possible that the psychiatrist was hearing a justifiably angry man with an accent he had never encountered before, rather than (as diagnosed) a

potential schizophrenic. We believe it is important to enquire into the ethnocentricity of public services. We highlight the fact that, eight years later, the hospital ejected him in a severely damaged state; the welfare services offered no welfare. His final brutalisation was an extreme version of the encounters he had always had with the Leeds police force, and periods in prison certainly did nothing to rehabilitate him. The police officer who inserted in David's charge sheet entry the word 'wog' as his nationality was inscribing the racism that he had repeatedly encountered.⁸ DOMA then makes a wider and somewhat theoretical point: David Oluwale is best understood and remembered as a person on whom a whole range of factors intersected. While his status as a black man was central, and thus his experience was shaped by structural and personal racism, becoming positioned as mentally ill and destitute was equally important in his life course. Thus, in remembering David, we are contributing to the rethinking of 'race'. In making an intersectional analysis of David's career in the north of England, the charity seeks to assist the city of Leeds in its delivery of services to those who today endure similar problems to David's. We support the view that such people should not be seen as 'simply' black, or brown, or as migrants, or homeless, or with mental health issues, but as dignified agents with multiple characteristics which should not be separated out. That is one of the lessons we want to draw from David's life. A better future can only be built on a better understanding, which requires some re-theorising, of the past. Remembering David can help us with that.

How is the Memorial Garden being made?

Transferring memory into place is a complex process, and the challenges it poses are great when the subject of that memory has as fraught a life as David Oluwale's. In inviting people to form a memorial committee, my first thought was how to assemble a coalition that would be able to reassure those who might be expected to oppose reference to this gruesome aspect of Leeds's

history at a time when it was proudly asserting its resurrection in the 21st century as a glossy, 24 hour city of multicultural pleasure and prosperity. Support immediately came from Professor Simon Lee, the Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Metropolitan University (whose community partnerships and volunteering team I was leading); from senior representatives of both Bishops of Leeds; from Arthur France MBE, chair of amongst other things the Leeds West Indian Centre and his daughter; and others including a leading member of Nigerian Community Leeds; a former Labour councillor with distinguished service in the social sector of Leeds; a leading national journalist living in Leeds; and a manager at St George's Crypt, the leading NGO in provision for the homeless in Leeds. With this impressive committee we immediately made three appointments. The first was with Councillor Keith Wakefield, the Labour Party's leader of Leeds City Council. As a long-standing anti-racist, Cllr Wakefield not only understood the story we wanted to tell, but suggested a patch of barren land for a memorial garden exactly where we wanted it to be: close to the River Aire, and close to the point at which we believe David Oluwale was drowned. The second was with a senior police officer with whom I had worked in an inner-city project. He supported our plans and obtained the support of his Chief Constable. Both saw the value in facing the grim past and emphasising the changes in policing since the 1970s. We saw their endorsement as crucial, since the views of the Chief Constable are taken very seriously by the powers-that-be in the city. The third was with the editor of the leading local newspaper, the Yorkshire Evening Post. This paper had covered the trial in great detail and its current editor recognised the reconciliation element in the committee's mission. A double page article appeared shortly after, explaining David's life and the committee's ambitions. Next we organised some public events and began to generate wider support the idea of a memorial garden. Then Labour lost power in the city. Despite support from a Conservative councillor, the new administration's leader opposed all talk of a memorial garden.

When Labour regained power a few years later, after I had retired from the university, we converted the committee into a registered charity and created a Board which was more diverse in

ethnicity and gender, and had more specialist skills (e.g. in charity law, accountancy, web-design).

More recently we acquired the service of a former Leeds MP and Labour Party Cabinet Minister, John Battle, as our chair. Our remit is to remember Oluwale, note the progress the city had made since the 1970s, and to campaign for improved understanding of, and service to, all those who today endure the full range of issues that David's life and tragic death exemplify. Diversity, equality and social justice are the guiding principles. We emphasise partnership work and always produce events which benefit from in-kind support from a wide range of organisations that share our values. So far these have included small NGOs in Leeds such as Together for Peace (community development), LASSN (asylum seekers support) and the Big BookEnd (a Leeds literary festival); larger NGOs such as Touchstone (serving disadvantaged people with an emphasis on mental health) and St George's Crypt (the homelessness agency); and major public sector institutions such as both the main universities in Leeds. In all our work the charity continually emphasises the role of the arts — including fiction, poetry, music, film — as an important means of communicating our message in a non-didactic way, opening up the space for conversation and cross-cultural understanding. Naturally, in this media saturated age, we make full use of the whole range of digital communications.

This detail is relevant because we recognised from the start that we are engaging in a 'place-making' process, and that carving out specific spaces in the urban landscape in order to assert particular social meanings is bound to be controversial. As Henri Lefebvre has explained, '[s]pace is permeated with social relations', 'shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements'.⁹ Thus, in our effort to situate memory, to make a place in the city's physical form where we will embed a narrative that mixes violent social exclusion with conscience, altruism and hope, we are bound to disrupt social relationships which themselves embody the assumptions and hierarchies of earlier periods in the city's history. In short, we are making an intervention which is undeniably political, while, as a charity, never engaging in 'party politics'. Our credibility is always open to challenge because we are always seeking the support of the whole of Leeds, which includes organisations that

cannot routinely be expected to welcome reminders of the city's colonial history, its relatively recent degradation of one of its Nigerian-born citizens, and its responsibility to make amends by including those whom it has hitherto excluded. In campaigning to bring 'the margins to the centre' we seek to change the mindset of many of those who have power in the city. To maintain our 'hearts and minds' momentum while we develop plans for the garden, we have organised a series of events, always including creative performance of one type or another, which mobilise support for our cause. These have ranged from a symposium of organisations working in the fields of homelessness, mental ill-health, migration, destitution and racism, to a literary competition seeking new poetry and short stories responding to the Oluwale story.¹⁰ We believe we have made progress in achieving our aims partly because we have received no negative publicity, but mainly because we have achieved support not only from those mentioned above, but from one global business, Britain's ASDA supermarket (a branch of the USA's Wal-Mart). It turned out that they are the owners of the scruffy piece of land suggested to us by Councillor Wakefield. ASDA has allowed us the use this piece of land for the launch of our charity in February 2013 (and its staff helped at that event), and is about to grant us a licence to develop 'David's Kitchen Garden' over the next year or two. This will give us a social space in which we will provide food and culture that will attract the most diverse audiences (in terms of social status and countries of origin). For the rest of the time it will be an informal space used by people who work or live nearby. It will include signage (print and digital) which will explain the Oluwale story and the charity's work. In about two years time, the focus will move a few hundred yards from this site to a sculpture garden in the grounds of The Tetley Centre for Contemporary Art and Learning. The centre-piece here will be a specially-commissioned work by an internationally-renowned British artist, with roots in its Empire, who identifies with the Oluwale story. The sculpture will represent growth, beauty, water-crossings and dialogue. It will put David Oluwale's life and the charity's campaigns at the centre of the city's cultural offer, attracting visitors from the UK and beyond.

Both the Kitchen Garden and the Sculpture Garden are designed to reflect the charity's ambitions to be places, social spaces, where:

- everyone is welcome
- there is sanctuary for all who are vulnerable
- the diversity of the cultures in Leeds is expressed
- quiet reflection is possible
- debate about the issues facing the city of Leeds may take place
- pleasure and conviviality are to be enjoyed
- social justice is promoted
- growth takes place — in flora and fauna, and in the lives of individuals and groups
- creativity in all its forms (music, film, art etc) abounds
- performance (spoken word, drama, dance etc) is produced
- and the gardens will be playful places, attractive to people of all ages and types.

These gardens and the sculpture will cost a great deal of money. We are confident that, in fulfilling the aims just described, a combination of public bodies, businesses, NGOs and philanthropists will meet the costs and thus contribute to a progressive social project, that combines the arts with social justice, making a unique public place in the centre of Leeds.

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NOTES

¹ Ron Phillips , 'The Death of One Lame Darkie' *Race Today* (January 1972) pp. 16-18.

² Phillips, 'Death' p. 18

³ Kester Aspden, *The Hounding of David Oluwale*, (London: Vintage, 2008). For a short account of the Oluwale story, see Max Farrar 'David Oluwale (1930-1969)' on the 'Africans in Yorkshire' website <http://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/david-oluwale.html> [Accessed 16.3.17]. A longer account is Max Farrar 'Remembering David Oluwale' in *Leeds Africa Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 78 (2017) pp. 172-183, available at <http://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/david-oluwale.html> [Accessed 16.3.17]

⁴ Caryl Phillips, 'Northern Lights' in *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

⁵ In another piece about Leeds and David Oluwale published in this journal in 2010, Caryl Phillips places even more emphasis on the migrants who have made Leeds, stressing the relationship the city has to the water, specifically its River Aire, which, thanks to the Aire-Calder canal, connects the city to the North Sea at its east (Hull) and the Atlantic at its west (Liverpool). See Caryl Phillips 'The City by the Water' in 'Ten Years Forward -- A Celebration', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 10 (2010), pp. 4-8

⁶ See my article 'Remembering David in history, poetry, music and film' for a complete account of all the work published on David Oluwale, including work by established poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Ian Duhig, as well as vernacular poetry and song. Without claiming to be a final account, this attempts to sort fact from fiction. Published on the Remember Oluwale website in July 2015. Available here <http://www.rememberoluwale.org/david-oluwale/remembering-david-in-history-poetry-music-and-film/> Much of that material will appear in Max Farrar, 'David Oluwale: making his memory and debating his martyrdom', in Keith Laybourn and Quentin Outram (eds.) *A History of Secular Martyrdom in the British Isles: From Peterloo to the Present*. (London: Palgrave, 2017 forthcoming).

⁷ For an important start on bringing these migrants' lives into the public record, see Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness - Migrant Journeys 1685 to the Present*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), particularly Chapter 8, 'Stowaways and others: racism and alternative journeys into Britishness'.

⁸ The first edition of Kester Aspden's book referred to above was called *Nationality: Wog* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007) and the jacket included a photograph of this charge sheet. He changed the title in the second edition (see note 3 above) because a reviewer suggested some might be offended by the term 'wog'.

⁹ Lefebvre, H. (1976) 'Reflections on the Politics of Space' in *Antipode* Vol 8 No 2 (May 1976), p. 31. I discuss the sociology of space in more detail in Chapter 5 of Max Farrar *The Struggle for 'Community'* . (Lampeter and New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002)

¹⁰ Photos and reports from the Partnership Symposium (April 2015) are available here <http://www.rememberoluwale.org/events/oluwale-partnership-symposium-reports-and-photos/> [Accessed 16.3.17] The *Remembering Oluwale Anthology* (ed. SJ Bradley, Valley Press, 2016) is described here <http://www.rememberoluwale.org/david-oluwale/remembering-oluwale-anthology-now-published/> [Accessed 16.3.17].