



MEMOIRS - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
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Saturday, 13 February 2021



Small Axe (anthology), Steve Mc Queen | 2020

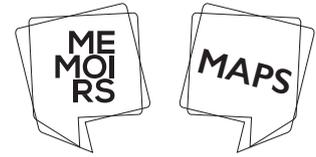
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AGAINST THE ERASURE OF MEMORY: SHORING UP THE FOUNDATIONS

Paulo de Medeiros

So if you are the big tree
We are the small axe
Ready to cut you down (well sharp)
To cut you down

Bob Marley ('Small Axe' 1973)

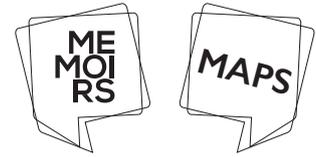


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Reflecting on the function of the Humanities in the first of the [2014 Tanner Lectures](#) given at Yale University, Paul Gilroy sounded a realistic note when he considered the contrast between the importance, and the relative scarcity, of studies on how racism deeply structures our society and how it affects us all and our notions of humanity. As he said, 'However unfashionable it has now become, studying racial hierarchy and inequality provides a valuable means to extend those inquiries, to locate the edges of the human: blunt and sharp. And that, in turn, means refusing to run away from the idea of race and the forms of systematic knowledge it has enabled, but rather embracing and exploring them as an opportunity to know ourselves and our precious world better' (Gilroy 2014: 22). Events unfolding in the six years since have only increased the acuity of Gilroy's observation at the same time that they have shown how, in spite of all the progress also made, attempts at holding up privileges based on structural and systemic inequality, whether in terms of class, gender, or race, have only become more desperate. They go hand in hand with the futile, but still devastating, efforts at denying history and enforcing the erasure of memory.

Steve MacQueen's series of five films for television, *Small Axe*, first aired on [BBC 1](#) from 15 November to 13 December 2020 – and available in many other countries and as DVD – constitutes a great antidote to such erasure of memory. Focusing on specific incidents from Caribbean life in London from the 1960s to the 1980's the films enable us to learn about many aspects of the past in both historical and personal terms. In the process, those films also go a long way towards rekindling memories for those who lived the events depicted; and creates a kind of strategic post-memory for those who not only came later, but also had no one break through the pact of silence concerning the lives of black people, their struggles against all forms of violence, the not uncommon failures of the educational system still so much in force, and their life affirming spirit and creative force. Critical reception of the films, individually, and as a series, has been overwhelmingly positive. In a year marked by so much devastation, wrought both by the pandemic, as well as by the political turmoil brought on by the rapid expansion of reactionary forces almost everywhere, their incendiary rhetoric and their open, violent, xenophobic and racist attacks, Steve MacQueen's films offered a ray of hope and a greatly needed counterbalance.

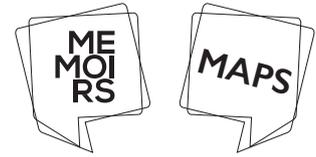
In the face of repeated, hostile, and often openly violent, forms of denial and suppression of history, education and memory become vital elements in resistance and in the creation of a more truthful view of the past. A view that might serve not only to prevent the most abhorrent and inhuman



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forms of oppression from returning yet again in the future, but to ensure that our very present may better reflect all parts of society instead of endlessly perpetuating exclusion. As such, education and memory are key bulwarks in the preservation of democracy. There is no coincidence in the fact that precisely democracy and education, as well as resistance, can be seen as key elements of all five films. In *Mangrove*, the first to be released, the depiction of the events leading to the [infamous trial of the 'Mangrove Nine'](#) and their subsequent full or partial acquittal, the focus is on the possibility of affirming the rule of law in a democratic state, even one riddled by systemic racism and inequality. While some might want to draw attention to the legal precedent established when the presiding judge, Edward Clarke, QC declared the trial had 'shown evidence of racial hatred', arguably the most important element, together with the dropping of many charges and the five full acquittals, was the recognition that [radical lawyering](#) – in an alliance between two white radical lawyers, Michael Mansfield QC and Ian Macdonald QC, and the defendants, some of whom acted in court as their own representatives – could prevail. Writing for the Verso blog, legal expert and activist Ife Thompson explains the importance of the Mangrove restaurant: 'For the Black community in the UK the creation of sites of Black resistance was vital to collective group survival'.⁽¹⁾ Being able to take their case to court, and once there, being able to show how structural racism operates, was also fundamental not only for survival but to claim back some of the very rights more often than not denied them as individuals and citizens. By focusing on that watershed moment in the quest for equality, McQueen's film rekindles seemingly buried memories of struggle and victory that are crucial for a current generation to understand and assume as their legacy.

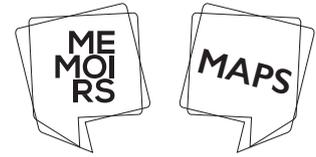
Small Axe is a formidable deployment of memory and imagination to redress the continuous, systemic, denial of belonging black people still must confront on a daily basis. The series as a whole, or in its constituent parts, offers black people in the United Kingdom a possibility of seeing themselves and their history represented centrally on the screen in a multiplicity of ways, not as extras but as citizens engaged fully in their own community as well as on the struggles in a polity fundamentally structured by inequality and oppression. Indeed, one could say that McQueen takes on Althusser's 1970 concept of ideological state apparatuses⁽²⁾ and dramatizes it, showing how the dominant ideology is enforced and reproduced through the repression of the police, the biases of the law, the failures of the educational system, and even the ambivalent function of family structures, simultaneously nurturing yet also conforming. This can be seen in many ways, for instance in the dismay of a father in *Red, White, and Blue* who had been openly and brutally beaten by the police



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upon hearing his son wants to leave his work as a scientific researcher to join the police force so as to bring change from within. Based on historical events and on the figure of Leroy Logan (John Boyega), the film highlights the importance of education to try to bring about change even when the son's resolution is met with both strong disapproval from the father as well as the pervasive, open, racism of his new colleagues.

The fundamental role played by education is further highlighted in *Education*, the last of the five films. As the BBC short [synopsis](#) has it, '[w]hen 12-year-old Kingsley is transferred to a special-needs school, a group of West Indian women uncover an unofficial segregation policy preventing many black children from receiving the education they deserve.' The film is based in part on Steve McQueen's own experience as a child, having himself been subject to exclusion from normal schooling as so many black children were then placed on 'special schools' for the 'educationally subnormal'. As he notes to Lola Okolosie, who wrote about the film and the issues it raises in [The Observer](#): "Even though we were from different backgrounds and races... we all knew we were being fucked over". Despite having dyslexia, he continues, "there was no help... you were left to your own devices...there was no interest" (15 November 2020). But this is not so much an historical film, even if it is that. It is also, like all of them, about the present and not just about the United Kingdom. If one would think that the educational system would have had to change in these past fifty years, at least on race issues, any look at the continuous outcry about current practices of systemic inequality and racism will quickly dispel such a belief. Okolosie, herself a teacher as well as a journalist, provides a bleak context when she notes that '... Afro-Caribbean boys are three times as likely as other pupils to be permanently excluded. The problem is even worse when considering working-class pupils as a whole: children eligible for free school meals – both Black and white – account for 40% of permanent exclusions.'⁽³⁾ As Okolosie notes, government figures indicate an estimated 4.2 million, or 30%, of all children in the UK, live in poverty, an astonishing figure set to rise further. The [report](#) of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, published in 2019 leaves no doubts: 'Although the United Kingdom is the world's fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021.'



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Steve McQueen's first feature film, [Hunger](#), (2008) was awarded the *Caméra d'Or* at Cannes, besides other awards. Its take on the 1981 hunger strike at Northern Ireland's Maze Prison and the death of Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) remains powerfully haunting. Like that film, the five films in *Small Axe*, which he started preparing immediately after finishing *Hunger*, also have the power to raise up ghosts. And it is a good thing they do, as without confronting those spectres still at the core of our society, there can be no moving forward. Yet, as much as both share a common emphasis on human courage and resilience, as well as on the strength of resisting the injustice of power, *Small Axe* is also an explosion of life as it shows the vibrancy of black culture. Whether in terms of the intense house party that seems to last forever in [Lovers Rock](#) or throughout all of the five films. And it is not just the music, or the dance, or the beautiful young people expressing themselves that are celebrated, but also the intensity of the work, the joy of preparing food, of being together and being a community. *Small Axe* is a powerful way of exposing the rot at the core of the system and cutting it as so much dead wood. But it is much more than that, as Steve McQueen recently told Paul Gilroy in a [conversation](#) at University College London on 26 October 2020: '... for me, *Small Axe* was about shoring up the foundations of who we are and where we came from and what we contributed to this country on so many levels and influenced it on so many levels. So, that's what *Small Axe* for me was about.'

(1) Ife Thompson. '[The Mangrove 9 and the Radical Lawyering Tradition](#)'. Verso Blog, 20 November 2020..

(2) Louis Althusser. 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État'. *La Pensée*, 151 (1970). Translated by Ben Brewster. 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

(3) Lola Okolosie. '[Discrimination at School: is a Black British History Lesson Repeating Itself?](#)'. *The Observer*. 15 November 2020.

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