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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

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by: **Martin Terre Blanche**

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# Community psychology and oral history in Eldorado Park: A case study in surveillance, confession and resistance

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Psychologists have a reputation for individualising, decontextualising and depoliticising human suffering. Despite numerous exceptions to this rule - e.g. the attempts to theorize colonial and class oppression by Fanon (1978), Bulhan (1985), Manganyi (1991) and others - it remains true that many psychologists choose to confine their work (and their thinking) to the safe world of the consulting room and the laboratory. Even the two branches of the discipline supposedly most concerned with social issues - social psychology and community psychology - are notorious for their persistent individualising tendencies.

In this paper we describe and critique a community psychology initiative, in which we are involved, which attempts to move beyond the individual as level of analysis and target for intervention. In particular we are concerned to show how the knowledge produced in and about communities through such initiatives constitutes an exercise of disciplinary power, and to question whether such power may be wielded in a beneficial manner.

## 'The invisible hand of death': Silence and invisibility in the Centre for Peace Action's foundational rhetoric

The Centre for Peace Action (CPA) is a community psychology project launched from the UNISA Health Psychology Unit, initially located in Eldorado Park but now also operating in surrounding areas. Founded in 1992 as the Eldorado Park Violence Prevention Programme, the CPA's stated mission is to reduce violence through community and personal empowerment.

Initial proposals for the project thus placed great emphasis on the need for involving community structures, and detailed plans were drawn up for the gradual transfer of programme control to community members. Although the usual difficulties associated with such an approach were experienced - community 'apathy', a tendency for already prominent individuals to present themselves as spokespersons for the community, rivalry with other community organisations, the difficulty of striking an acceptable balance between academic and community workers (reviewed in Mgoduso, Butchart & Terre Blanche, 1992; Butchart & Seedat, 1993) - the CPA remains committed to the idea of

community empowerment as a prerequisite for violence prevention (c.f. Terre Blanche & Seseli, 1992; Seedat, Terre Blanche, Butchart & Nell, 1992; Seedat, 1994).

This talk of empowerment has in part relied on ideas from American community psychology, which defines empowerment as "identifying, facilitating or creating contexts in which hitherto silent or isolated people, those who are 'outsiders' in various settings, organizations and communities, gain understanding, voice, and influence over decisions that affect their lives" (Rappaport, 1990, p. 52). According to Swift and Levin (1987), professionals should be concerned with the "discovery and announcement of empowerment deficits" (p. 85) and this should then be rectified through attention

> "both to the phenomenological development of a certain state of mind (e.g., feeling powerful, competent, worthy of esteem, etc.) and the modification of structural conditions in order to reallocate power (e.g., modifying the society's opportunity structure) - in other words, empowerment refers both to the subjective experience and the objective reality." (p. 73)

Setting aside for the moment the extreme arrogance and paternalism of this position, it is interesting for its dual depiction of power. It is both a commodity, which South African psychologists should presumably wrest from the apartheid or post-apartheid state and place in the hands of the 'community', and a state of mind, which can be attained by making oppression visible and by getting people to speak out against it.

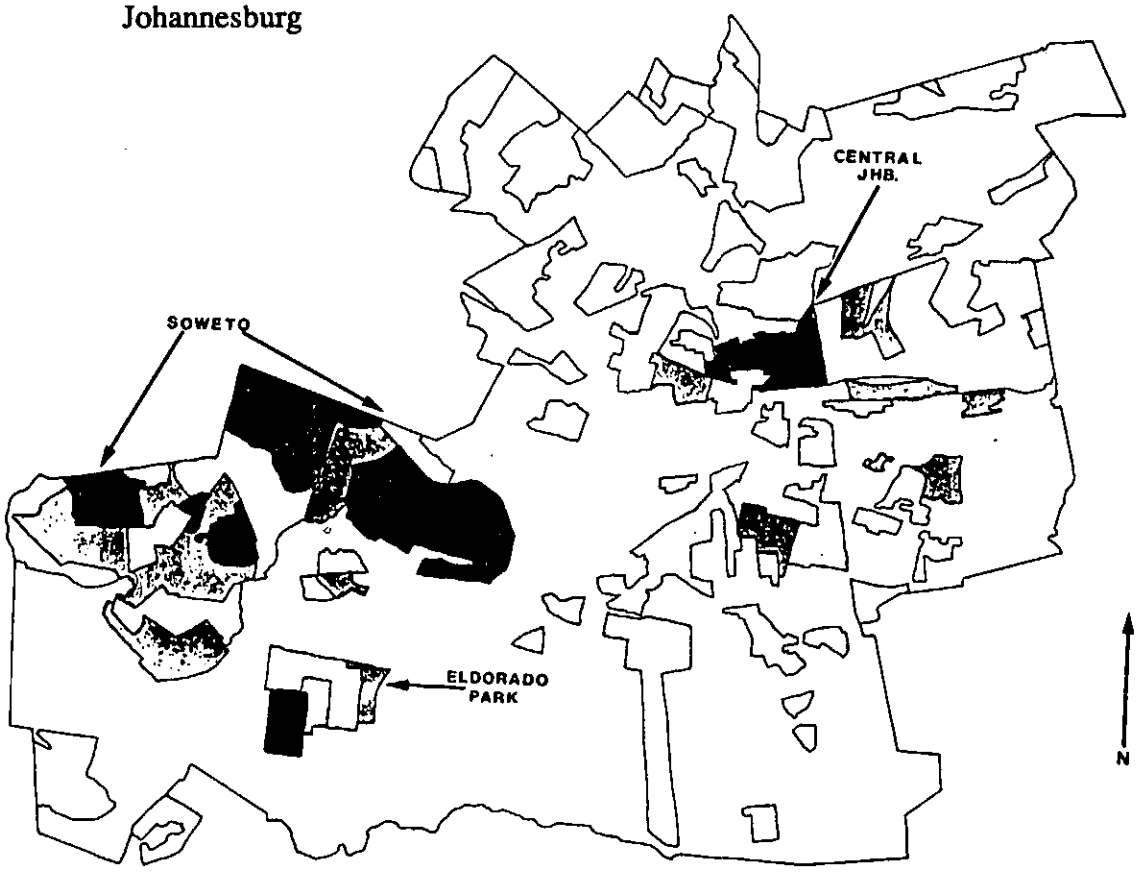
These two forms of power correspond roughly to what Foucault (1977) terms repressive vs disciplinary power. In Foucault's view, power as traditionally conceptualized and exercised in European societies up to around the end of the eighteenth century serves to suppress individuality and coerce people into compliance with the state through mechanisms of social control external to the person. As a prototypical example of this form of power, Foucault refers to the "age of confinement" in medieval Europe during which the ideal of a pure community was aspired to through banishment of the mad and the bad (such as lepers, syphilitics and other 'sinners') to the social periphery and their containment there by violent force and physical barriers. In South Africa, the architects of apartheid can be seen to have adopted precisely the same strategy, and Eldorado Park, along with every other township and homeland that was born of the group areas act and the related practice of forced removals, are the products of this repressive power (Figure 1).

In contrast to repressive power, Foucault (1977) discerns "disciplinary" power, which he and others argue has largely displaced repressive power in the developed world, but which in South Africa must be viewed as operating in tandem with repression. Disciplinary power works not so much by suppressing individuality, but rather by constituting individuals and creating particular "truths" and properties at the level of the population and the individual. This happens at the societal level through mechanisms of surveillance, which involve the creation of knowledge through scientific and other disciplines that enumerate, classify and define aggregates of individuals, and at the individual level through the processes of self-normalization, and confession, the latter referring to "a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (Parker, 1989, p. 64). The practice of confession (of which psychotherapy is a prototypical example) is based on the modernist idea that truth is lodged deep within the individual from where it needs to be liberated. Confession is, however, a trap in that it constructs the individual to him or herself as the source of meaning while disguising the ways in which he or she is in fact glued into place by supra-individual discourses.

Complementing Foucault's depiction of power is Bulhan's elaboration of the

subjectifying consequences of repressive power in colonial conquests. Through constant bombardment by messages and actions that devalue her being and biography, the colonial subject is decentered, her agency displaced and her authenticity shattered (Fanon, 1978; Manganyi, 1991).

Figure 1. "Banishing the mad and the bad": Eldorado Park relative to Soweto and Johannesburg




Mechanisms of surveillance and confession have operated in various forms in the course of the CPA's three-year history in Eldorado Park. The initial impetus for the founding of the CPA came from epidemiological surveys of trauma and violence conducted by Health Psychology Unit researchers (Nell & Butchart, 1988; Butchart & Brown, 1991), which indicated that Eldorado Park was one of the areas in Johannesburg-Soweto most severely affected by violence, with the rate of non-fatal injuries among coloureds (3821 per 100 000 population) twice that among Africans, and exceeding one in ten for coloured males aged 15 to 30 (Butchart & Brown, 1991).

This classical epidemiological process, in which medical surveillance detects hitherto unsuspected lesions or sites of disease on the public body, was fully exploited in funding proposals that made much of Eldorado Park as an under-publicised and therefore officially neglected area. The first issue of the CPA's newsletter, aimed as much at outside funders and supporters as at the Eldorado Park public, thus rather appropriately carried the following front page headline: *The Invisible Hand of Death.*

In tandem with epidemiological surveillance, which emphasized issues of visibility and invisibility, the Centre has also operated in the domain of confession, emphasizing issues of silence and voice, and constructing residents as agentic individuals, ultimately

responsible for their own salvation. Examples of CPA initiatives of this sort include psychological counselling offered to survivors of violence, the small business project (which constructs residents as potentially self-sufficient entrepreneurs) and a woman's project, which encourages women to 'break the silence' around spouse abuse.

These systems of surveillance and confession brought to bear on the Eldorado Park public were, and are, not unproblematic in their effect. On the one hand, Rose (1990) warns that applied social science often involves the "fabrication of the autonomous self as a key term in analyses of social ills and cures, as the object of expert knowledge, [and] as the target of systems of moral orthopaedics." (p. 254) Thus, attempts at violence prevention that feed into the modernist discourse of individual agency risk blaming the victim and mystifying the relation between power and violence in the area. On the other hand, an emphasis on broad social and political factors as the exclusive cause of violence tends to constitute residents as passive victims in need of outside rescue.

Whatever route the CPA had chosen to take - for instance if it had established itself as a psychological counselling clinic or as purely a research institute - it would have become entangled in the same, or similar dynamics. The question is not whether these difficulties could be avoided, but whether CPA staff's relative awareness of social science as a system of power and knowledge production positively affected their practice in Eldorado Park. Are Foucaultian and similar analyses useful only on a post-hoc basis or can they be used to guide action?

## 'The last true voice of Black people': Oral history and the possibility of resistance

Uncomfortable with the idea of applying psychological expertise with no regard for 'lay' insights, and with publishing exclusively in an academic context, the CPA management at an early stage conceived of the idea of an oral history project. As one of the planning documents put it: "As an academic it is all too easy to take the knowledge and to make it disappear - never returning to be developed among the people." The project drew inspiration from previous South African work in popular history (reviewed in Callinicos, 1991; Eloff, 1991) and from various attempts at conducting participatory social science research (c.f. Hansson, Carolissen & Prinsloo, 1989; Ramphele, 1990) both of which attempt to democratise the process of knowledge production. Thus the intention was to revalidate what Scott (1990) terms 'hidden transcripts' or what Foucault (1980) would call 'subjugated knowledges', "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity... a particular, local regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity" (p. 82). The idea, as encapsulated in the slogan "reclaim our past - rebuild our future", was that, through a process of historical self-reflection, 'the community' would rediscover a sense of belonging and civic pride which would supersede the negative identity thrust on it by apartheid.

To give effect to these aims a working group (mostly male teachers) of Eldorado Park residents were recruited. This group interviewed around 100 people on historical and contemporary topics, organised an essay-writing competition in local schools, arranged several exhibitions and produced a number of newsletters. Although this group has now disbanded, another group has since been formed and has continued some of these activities.

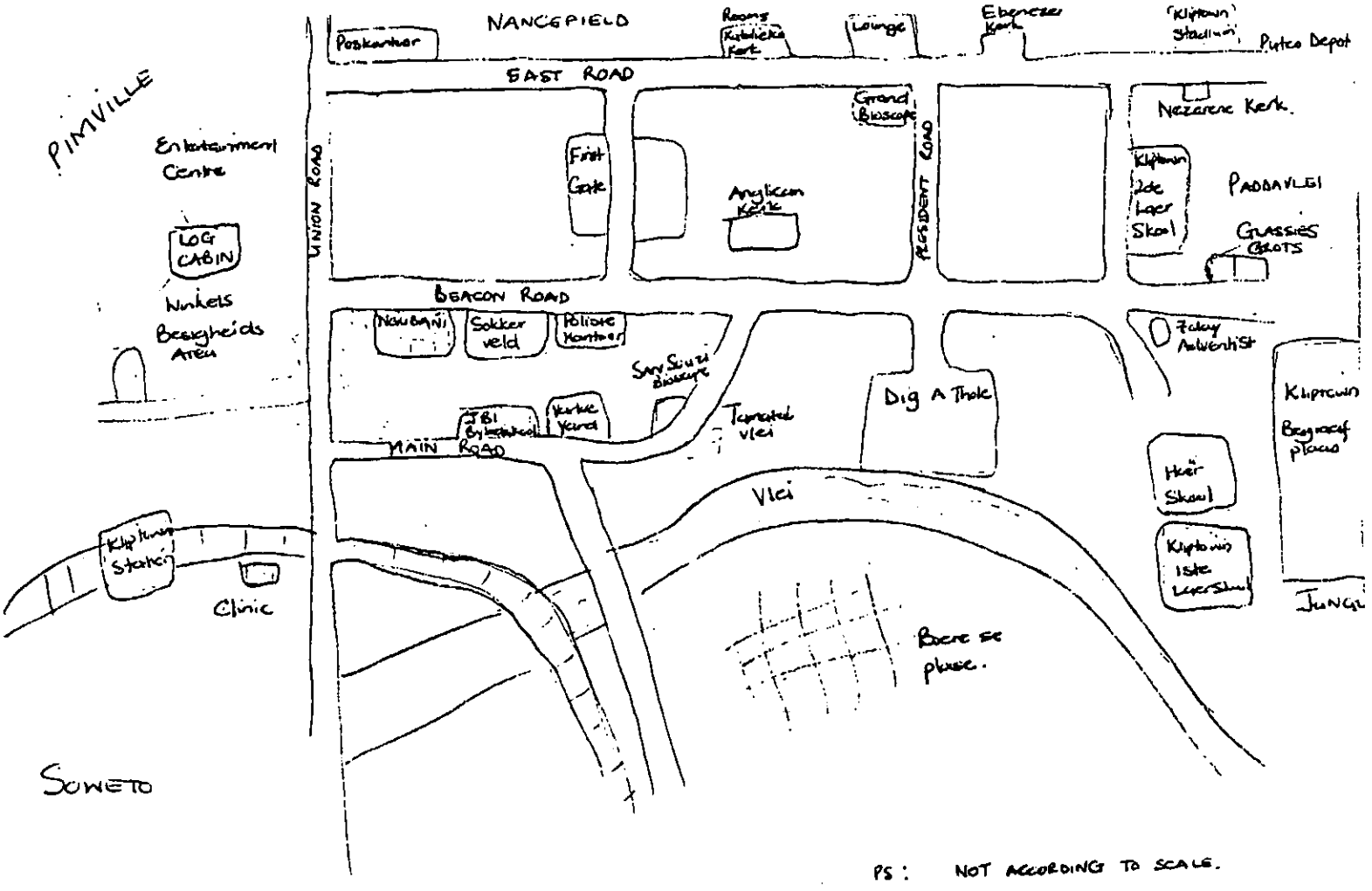
From a Foucaultian perspective, such efforts may be viewed as an attempt to reclaim subjugated knowledges but also as itself a form of subjugation, i.e. both a 'history from below' in which the authentic voice of the people speaks out against domination, and a ritual in which people are made to confess dominant truths scripted for them in advance.

What scripts do community psychologists have in mind when they ask people about their history? According to Banton (1985), psychologists find the idea of community attractive because of a half-formulated desire for a more collective and supportive social structure:

> "This desire, rather than struggling towards expression in new forms of social arrangement, resorts to history - not the history of objective fact, but of romanticised fantasy which masquerades as common knowledge / common sense... The 'remembered' community is not, has never been, the real community; it has more affinities with the idealised relations of early family life than with any earthly realm." (p. 169)

Our interviewees did indeed continually hark back to times when the community was more closely knit, and racial divisions were less starkly delineated than they are now. Many Eldorado Park families moved there from the adjoining Kliptown and the 'slum' areas which grew around it in the 1950s and 60s. The small scale ("we were all like one big family", interviewees said) and organic contours of the area (Figure 2) form a sharp contrast with the harsh racial boundaries characteristic of greater Johannesburg today (Figure 1).

Figure 2. Sketch map of Kliptown in the 60s



When interviewees spoke in glowing terms of life in Kliptown, Alexandra and Sophiatown ("we were poor but free", they said), were they resisting the discourse of racial separation, perpetuating the discourse of community psychology, or countering both these 'official transcripts' with a 'hidden transcript' of their own?

Conversely, although most interviewees spoke with fondness of the pre-apartheid days, a number made racist remarks, for instance in describing exploitation of coloured tenants by Indian landowners, sometimes as a fairly central feature of the story they had to tell. Contrary to our expectations, there were also - in addition to stories of forced removal -several who spoke of the proclamation of Eldorado Park as a coloured area as a victory for the community. Were these people resisting the community psychology discourse and perpetuating the discourse of apartheid?

With hindsight it seems clear to us that at least one feature of the way in which the oral history project was run encouraged interviewees to buy into either the discourse of community psychology or the discourse of apartheid, or both. The difficulty, which has since been rectified (also in other aspects of the CPA's work), was the project's almost exclusive focus on the stories of Eldorado Park residents only. Kliptown was a demographic epicentre from where people were catapulted into racially exclusive areas such as Eldorado Park, Soweto, Lenasia and the suburbs of white Johannesburg. Much the same is true of Eldorado Park's other 'feeder areas' such as Alexandra. While the revalidation of the 'coloured story' can help foster civic pride, and form the basis of the Eldorado Park community's special identity, it can also be used to reinforce racism. If interviews had, for instance, also been conducted with people from Soweto who used to live in Kliptown, a more nuanced comparison of 'coloured' and 'African' trajectories since the Kliptown days would have been possible.

In publishing the material similar mistakes were also at first made, for instance in the group's decision to withhold racially sensitive material. To argue that ideas which go against the grain of a non-racial democratic ideal should be censored reflects a repressive concept of power, which in its emphasis on control through destruction and coercion, eliminates the possibility of making visible the manner in which people participate in their own subordination and inferiorisation.

The ways in which dominant conceptions are reproduced in 'popular' consciousness is further illustrated by the photographs which the group collected and commissioned to illustrate their material. At first lacking a camera, the group invited outside photographers to take photographs in and around Eldorado Park, while at the same time articulating their concern that control of the representational process should rest with residents so as to ensure that material resulting from the exercise would be an authentic reflection of life in Eldorado Park in its full heterogeneity. Of particular concern was a tendency by outside photographers to rely on what could be called the aesthetics of poverty (Figure 3).

However, when the services of a local photographer was enlisted, with the request to assemble a portfolio of photographs that would more accurately reflect "all of Eldo's", and when the group later obtained its own camera, many similar photographs continued to be produced and it became clear that breaking away from conventional ways of seeing the area would require more than a transfer of ownership of the means of knowledge production.

Another incident demonstrating how 'popular consciousness' is always interpenetrated by one or the other dominant discourse occurred when a group of youths identified with the African Hip-Hop Movement took exception to a newsletter article

(Figure 4) claiming that the gangster element in Eldorado Park was influenced by movies such as New Jack City and by Hip-Hop culture in general. The youths were invited to write a rebuttal, which they did very effectively, in hip American style, claiming amongst other things that "Rap has been internationally identified as the last true voice of Black people". However, in resisting the parochialism which the oral history project was in danger of propagating, they seemed unaware of the way in which they were being hailed by another equally constraining discourse.

Figure 3. An Eldorado Park scene (photograph: Natasha Pincus)

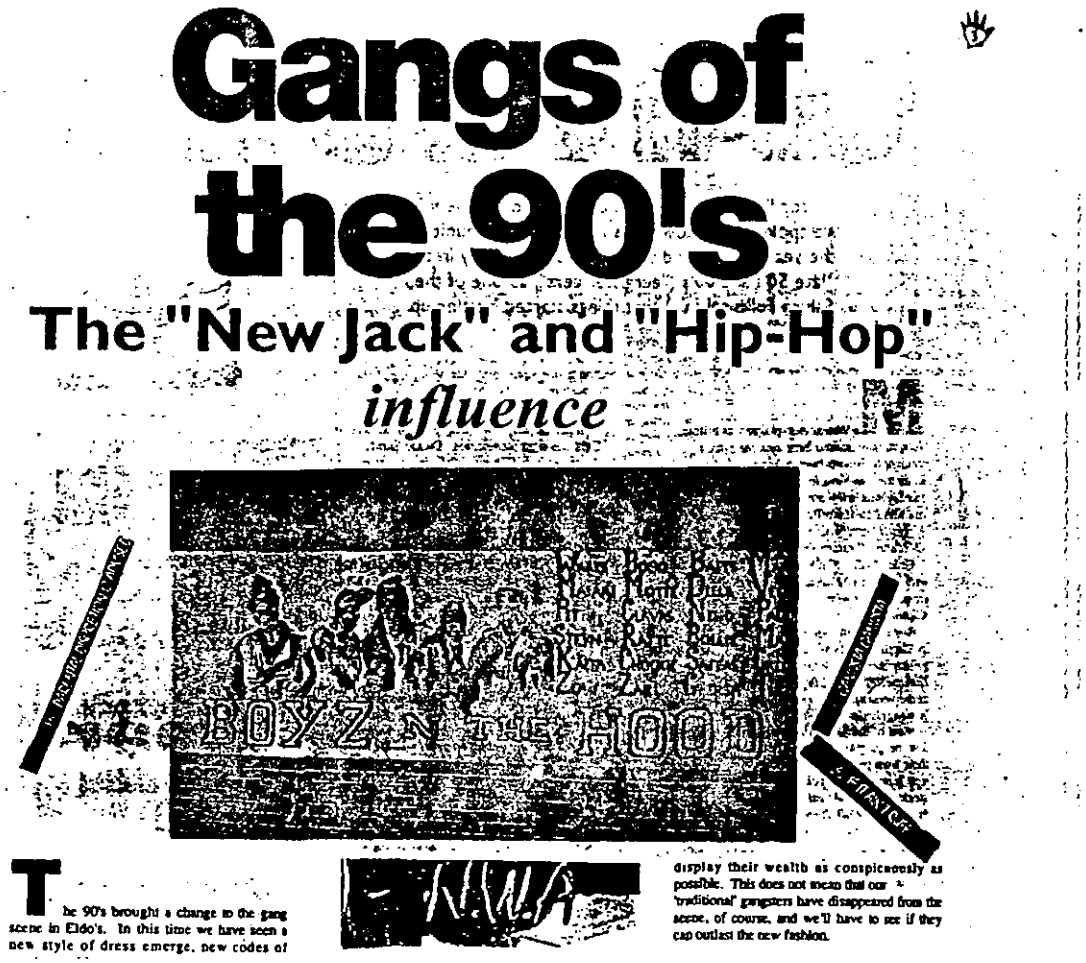


It should perhaps come as no surprise that the best prescription we have for the future development of the oral history project is that it should cultivate a climate likely to induce critical self-reflection, encouraging the 'confession' by the community both of how it has been oppressed and of how it has been socialised to subordinate itself. This requires that there be a space in which unpalatable opinions can be heard and their existence

acknowledged and challenged - not in order to victimise and condemn, but rather to begin a process in which conflict can be managed in a constructive way.

We suspect that this is a formulation almost invariably arrived at by 'knowledge workers' of all sorts. Callinicos (1991) for instance concludes her survey of popular history with the claim that "we are faced with the urgent need to facilitate the growth of a culture of critical thinking" (p. 36), and with the hope that popular history will be able "to foster a well-informed, independently minded public which will participate in the pursuit, and the making, of their own history" (p. 37). We should not, however, forget that this is an exercise in disciplinary power, an attempt, to put it crudely, to recreate 'the community' in the image of the academy.

Figure 4. Oral history newsletter article




The editor of the *People's Voice* (1993), an Eldorado Park based newspaper which appears at irregular intervals, recently had this to say about the CPA and the oral history project:

> When they initially came to Eldorado Park, they promised to empower our community and then leave. This however has never happened. Instead they have used our community as a guineapig for outside scholars to become experts on our living habits. They have also created the impression nationally that we are a

community of hooligans, gangsters, and women batterers.

This kind of vigorous contestation around the legitimacy of particular forms of knowledge is of course exactly the sort of resistance on which disciplinary power flourishes. As Armstrong (1987) argues: "Power represses and must be resisted, but this injunction only applies to the capricious power of the king; disciplinary power on the other hand provokes and works through resistance: an upraised hand to avert the gaze of surveillance marks the beginning of a self-existence for the nascent individual." (p. 68-69). If there is effective resistance to the kind of power brought to bear by initiatives such as the oral history project, if there is a hidden transcript, then it is in the continuing lack of interest in such matters among the majority of the Eldorado Park public.

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