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A Portrait of Biko

Nearly six months ago I left CUHK for a semester abroad at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I lived in Isla Vista, a small college town by the Pacific Ocean that differs from Hong Kong in nearly every imaginable way except one: both suffer from a severe housing crisis.

I arrived in January to discover that many exchange students were being placed in hotel rooms outside town, and many American students had resorted to sleeping in their cars (I knew a few whose vans contained their whole lives). I was lucky to avoid both fates, finding instead a spot in a student housing cooperative that would come to define my entire exchange experience and redefine my understanding of community.

This gigantic house was home to eighteen humans, seven cats, and a dog. I lived in one of its twelve bedrooms, shared its six bathrooms, and cooked almost daily in its large, communal kitchen. Its interior walls were painted in every imaginable colour. Its exterior was solid orange, with a large stencil

facing the street that announced our community to the world: BIKO.

That is, Bantu Stephen Biko. When the student co-op purchased the house in 1997, they named it after the South African anti-apartheid revolutionary and student leader who founded the Black Consciousness movement. Biko did not live to see the end of apartheid in South Africa; he was tortured to death by police in 1977 at the age of 30. The house was designated as a house for people of colour (POC), tasked with maintaining a safe, respectful space for POC students in a predominantly white campus community, and committed to fighting racism and spreading social justice and cultural awareness. The result? A beautiful and intentional community was built.

Every human resident at Biko had a house chore (mine was cleaning the communal fridge, admittedly a much more pleasant chore than cleaning one of the bathrooms) and did kitchen duty one night a week. Some of us had *house roles*. My roommate had the thankless job of being the maintenance manager, tasked with the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of "fixing the Wi-Fi." Significantly, we did not have a landlord. The house is owned by the co-

op, and the co-op is owned by its members: us. (We still paid room and other fees every month though.)

Inside, all sorts of progressive ideals decorated the walls. They included real quotes by Steve Biko like “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed;” and not-so-real ones like “Real revolutionaries do the dishes.”

Countless other quotes were plastered everywhere, many of which I suspect originated at Biko. My favourite was “Don’t let the cops in or the cats out.”

On the kitchen walls was a heartfelt poem to Patrice Lumumba and an eye-catching poster that read: *women are perfect*. Che Guevara covered the freezer door, while Bob Marley welcomed housemates and guests alike to the oceanside bathroom. My bedroom wall paid homage to other dead icons (‘R.I.P Edward Said’), authors, and activists whose books inhabited our overflowing bookshelves. Artistic creations of past housemates were signed and dated, and in this way, the house captured the transient spirit of students who found within its walls a home throughout the years.

With time, I learned the many quirks of our small community and of the house

in which we lived. For instance, the TV had two functions: it played the newest episode of Euphoria on Sunday nights when we all gathered in front of it (on other nights, it played reruns of RuPaul’s Drag Race), but it also hid from view the many bongs that were tucked away behind it whenever parents came over to visit. For every problem at Biko there was a solution. When an epidemic of unwashed dishes hit our house, some members suggested (jokingly, I assume) installing cameras in the kitchen—a sort of dish-washing surveillance system. (This was the second time the use of security cameras was considered. The first was after two incidents of window-shootings.) When the weekend arrived early and the music got too loud in the living room, the answer was there before the word was even uttered: garage.

This was perhaps the most special part of Biko House: Biko Garage. It was what our house was best known for, featured in several articles and innumerable Instagram posts. Detached from the rest of the house and covered spectacularly in graffiti, our garage hosted workshops by day and music shows and parties by night. Before Covid, it was the beating heart of the punk rock scene in Isla Vista. During my exchange, it was a

stronghold for party-goers who chose to avoid frats and other such spaces where they felt less safe or welcome.

Although I never asked, I'm uncertain that my housemates had more than a vague idea who Steve Biko was. I am guilty of having not heard of him before applying to the co-op, and it admittedly took me several months into my exchange to really learn more about his life and death.

One day, upon entering the lecture hall for my class in the Global Studies department, I found Steve Biko projected onto the screen. As the professor lectured us on Black Consciousness, I was hoping he'd ask our class if we'd heard about that student co-op on 6612 Sueno Road named Biko. I would then take the opportunity to raise my hand and speak of my experiences there, taking pride in the knowledge that more than four decades after Biko's death, there remains in his name a community of radical communal living, wild parties that celebrate black and brown bodies, and an unyielding tradition of activism in this small college town on the Pacific edge of the United States.