



OLIVE WOULD HAVE

OLIVE WOULD HAVE TOLD ME TO SHUT UP AND DO SOMETHING

It began with a photograph of a black girl who came before the words and aesthetics of black resistance became commodified for white, middle-class audiences via mainstream pop and HBO, and before anti-racist politics became institutionalised in ivory towers and non-governmental organisations.

The girl was Olive Morris. And the message was clear as day. Not only in its broken syntax, screaming of an organic sense of defiance, but also in its rough aesthetic. The picture of a young black girl with shorn hair, standing in the middle of Brixton with a fag in one hand, a sign in the other, and an unforgettable sneer across her face. This is how the *Do you remember Olive Morris?* project began, which now encompasses the work of a dynamic collective of women who span a range of nationalities, ages, colours and convictions.

This photo both inspires and haunts. There is something about Morris's face, alight with an arrogance and an unapologetic passion of youth that cannot be dismissed and should not be forgotten. What does it mean in a time of deep cynicism, in a time in which activism often acts as a bad cliché that people pass through like fashion trends, to remember Olive Morris? What should and can this act of remembering, this investment in the past, mean? Beyond nostalgic kitsch, is there value in investing in recollections of past struggle, of revolutionary figures who can be forgotten as quickly as they can be sentimentalised—gestures that fail to address contemporary questions of racism and sexism in the UK?

I came to the UK in October 2008. It took me an extra month to obtain a visa, because of new immigration and citizenship laws that have been instituted since the London bombing of 2005. I came with a deep sense of dread that this place, like the rest of the Western world, seems to be beset with a mind-numbing paranoia towards "terrorism," a term which is used to manage all forms of dissent. I stood in the city five months ago and watched myself being watched through the eyes of a CCTV camera. I noticed slight changes since I was last here in 2002. The off-licences once run by tired-looking Pakistani people were now being run by tired-looking Turkish people. The toilets once cleaned by exploited (and should be grateful to be) African women, were now being cleaned by exploited (and should be grateful to be) Eastern European women. I felt a sense of deep cynicism grow in me. I remembered marching in 2003, like countless others, to protest the imperialist invasion of Iraq, only to turn on the television the next day and see bombs drop. I remembered walking through the museums of England, seeing the trophies of colonisation splayed out like the carcasses of a proud hunter.

I remembered the sick jokes and bitter ironies that were used to manage the deep melancholia that comes to haunt a place so steeped in histories of violence and genocide, yet so determined to see itself as civilised and just.

And then, there were these photographs. These grainy black and white photos of a girl, a black girl, who didn't look angry as much as she looked cocky. A girl who, pardon the expression, looked like she had some balls. In her face, I saw something that is often not spoken of outside of the trite speeches of politicians and the sanctimonious sermons of preachers – I saw hope.

Olive Morris was an activist whose name and face have all but been forgotten in a time in which activism has become synonymous with the faces and names of young white university-educated men whose resistance is often fashioned out of a mixture of narcissistic lifestyle choices and high-brow political theory.

Since becoming a member of the Remembering Olive Collective, and working closely with Ana Laura López de la Torre in chronicling and cataloguing her ongoing work on this project, I have been both shocked and inspired. Shocked by how black British and specifically black British feminist history in this country is invisible. I have had countless conversations with people born and raised in this country – black, white, Asian and everything in between – who have no idea that the British Black Panthers existed. I have had countless conversations with people who could spit out lyrics from American hip hop ad nauseum but have never heard of Olive Morris or Claudia Jones. I have had countless conversations with people who look a bit bored of all this, and just want to talk to you about the latest hipster hair in Shoreditch or the latest yuppie culinary tips that Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson have on offer.

At the same time, I have been deeply inspired by the work of the women who are part of the Remembering Olive Collective. Women who come from India, North America, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and the UK, who meet monthly in Brixton to honour the life and spirit of Olive Morris through a continuous will for change. Women who somehow find child care, get the night off work, call in sick, finally get their visa issues sorted out, so that they can make it to Brixton and talk about intangible and beautiful ideas like justice, solidarity and revolution.

The Collective has worked closely with Lambeth Archives and Gasworks in an effort to make sure that the life and work of Olive Morris and other black British feminists are preserved. These efforts to preserve history are about more than nostalgia. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines nostalgia as: "1) A bittersweet longing for things, persons, or situations of the past; 2) The condition of being homesick; homesickness." Nostalgia often involves a fixation on a romanticised version of the past that is both derived from and helps to foster a deep lack of unease with one's current situation. One could argue that the effort to remember the life and work of Morris comes out of the malaise of late

capitalism, that fixating on the lives of past revolutionaries is a way of failing to engage with the contemporary world and its litany of problems and struggles. However, I think that the work of the *Do you remember Olive Morris?* project and the Remembering Olive Collective could not be farther from melancholic or nostalgic.

If you come to our meetings, you begin to see that we are not drawn to Morris in grief but out of inspiration. This photo of a young girl, a young black girl in Brixton whom so many of us involved in this project never met, has become something like a mirror. A figure of defiance and passion that all who are involved in the project perhaps see or would like to see little pieces of ourselves reflected in.

Perhaps this photo of Olive Morris, this story of a young girl who, by all official accounts and numbers should have been disempowered and should not have had the strength to fight, is like a breath of fresh air. We breathe in stories of resistance, of solidarity, of sisterhood in all the best strategic uses of the word, and then we exhale. We gather breath and strength from all that was possible in the time that Olive organised and protested and stirred shit up, and all that still remains possible today.

I was born in 1979, the year that Olive Morris died. At the time of her death, Morris was only a few years younger than I am today. I am “Asian” (the official term in North America is “South Asian.” although my parents would call themselves Indian, and a lot of “South Asians” in the diaspora would say Brown or Desi).

Olive Morris was black. She was born in Jamaica and when she migrated to England at age nine, she was referred to as Coloured. It’s funny that I have an immediate will to categorise Morris’ body and my own. To place us within the neat, succinct state-led boxes that separate bodies, that classify and count people. In contemporary UK, the language of difference and the categorisations of non-white bodies have become complex. Fill out any job application, apply for any grant, and you will be met with a litany of categories, British Asian, Indian, British Asian Bangladeshi, African, Black British, Mixed-race Black, Mixed-race Indian and so on. Some would argue that this specificity has come out of the demands of various communities that wish to be recognised for their regional, linguistic or religious difference. Others would argue that the breaking up of a unified “Black” British identity that defined Olive Morris’ generation and categorised all non-white subjects as “Black” erodes possible solidarities between differently racialised bodies.

I find myself wondering why I, a brown woman from India, who immigrated to Canada, and now finds herself in the UK, was drawn towards Olive Morris. I find myself wondering if, in an era in which blackness has become co-opted as an empty fashionable signifier while black women continue to be the poorest and most politically under-represented people in the world, I have any right to be involved in a project about Morris' life. I find myself laughing at all this heady introspection, thinking that someone like Olive Morris, who was a grassroots activist, feminist, Black Panther, squatter and internationalist would have probably just told me to shut up and do something.

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