



SOUL POWER IN B

SOUL POWER IN BRITAIN

All year long I had prepared to pack up my belongings, give up my flat, and move across the Atlantic to uncover the history of Soul Power in Britain. The term Soul Power, which was coined in the late 1960s by African American youth, describes the melding of Black Nationalist political strategies with the black cultural consciousness of the late 1960s and 1970s. I had already done a substantial amount of work on the afro-coifed, dashiki-wearing soul sisters and brothers in the United States who used the slogan “Black Power” to express their political stance, and phrases like “Black is Beautiful” to communicate their soulfulness. For these young women and men in urban cities in the US, Soul Power was a celebration of black music, fashion, beauty, and culinary traditions, which defined African Americans as a distinct, culturally and politically, empowered community. Knowing little about black politics and culture in Britain, I wanted to interrogate how black Britons expressed their Soul Power and how they defined their role in the larger black liberation movement.

After settling into the pace of my new life in the bustling, cosmopolitan city of London, I dove into the archives, full of the excitement and vigour of a school-aged child. During my various visits to London’s black archives such as the George Padmore Institute’s photo collection, I unearthed pictures of black youth on the streets of London’s most segregated neighbourhoods, holding signs that read “British Police = Racist Police” and “Hands Off Black Kids.” Their posters articulated a struggle similar to that advocated by the US Black Power: the end of police brutality, equal employment and so forth. Yet, the protesters’ signs also spoke to struggles specific to the black British community, such as teachers’ violence directed towards black students and race riots with the white Teddy Boys.

One photograph in particular that I found at the Black Cultural Archives caught my attention more than the others. It was an image of a young black woman who embodied Soul Power. She had deep-brown skin and a small afro. This sharply dressed woman – wearing a fur-looking coat, a collared shirt and wrist jewellery – was pointing her finger directly in a white man’s face. Her unapologetically bold posture exuded power and her hairstyle and clothing spoke to her awareness of her identity as a black woman. I later learned that this woman was radical Black Power and Black Feminist activist Olive Morris, a fearless community activist who fought for the rights of the disenfranchised throughout Britain. Olive and the young protestors in the pictures were my introduction to Soul Power in Britain.

As I delved deeper into my research, never forgetting those initial photographs, I came to realise two things about British Soul Power. I learned that while there was a strong

resemblance in the dress and aesthetic style of soul sisters and brothers in Britain and in the United States, there were distinct differences. I also realised that Soul Power in England – London specifically – played a more critical role in the global fight for black liberation in the 1960s than the formal, academic literature on the era conveyed. Britain was not only a part of the Soul Power network; it was central to the proliferation of soul symbols across a transnational network of radical black activists.

As I began to peel back the layers of Britain's short-lived Black Power history, I found that British Soul Power was rooted in Caribbean cultures and histories. While ubiquitous markers of Soul Power – like the afro hairstyle that Olive wore and ephemera such as Black Panther badges – were exported from the US to the UK, the British context alone gave these soul symbols a different meaning. As in the United States, Soul Power in Britain challenged white cultural and political hegemony, or dominance of one nation or peoples over another. Yet, unlike the US context which celebrated real and imagined cultures from Africa – a homeland that many Black Americans had never visited – British Soul Power drew upon the Caribbean cultures of recent immigrants. For example, when Olive's family left Jamaica in 1961 to settle in South London, they undoubtedly brought with them culinary, musical and leisure practices; comforts of home that perhaps held a newfound importance for them in a foreign land.

The authors of *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* tell of whites chastising young West Indian immigrants, calling them "golliwogs" and making fun of their English which was mixed with patois from their various islands.¹ It was not until young children, like Olive Morris, came to Britain from places such as Jamaica and Trinidad that they became more fully aware of the difference in the texture of their hair and their cultural customs that set them apart from whites. As the Black Power movement gained momentum in the UK, West Indian blacks asserted a specifically Caribbean Soul Power which celebrated Caribbean music such as reggae and calypso and festivals such as Carnival, which had been denigrated by white Brits. Therefore, British Soul Power was similar to that of the US in *form* but was different in *meaning*.

The blend of West Indian, African American and African cultures that influenced Soul Power in Britain was also reflective of the cosmopolitan, outward-looking organising philosophies espoused by black British activists. Because most Caribbean immigrants never expected to settle in the UK, they remained connected to the cultural, political and social happenings in their homelands. Therefore, a city like London quickly became an epicentre for radical activism that connected black people and other oppressed groups around the globe in a transnational community of political exchange. Leaders from the Caribbean and the US, including Amy Ashwood Garvey, Claudia Jones, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Angela

¹ Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race. Black Women's Lives in Britain*, London: Virago, 1985, p.62.

Davis encouraged young, black Britons to challenge oppression through grassroots, national and international organising. Moreover, various London-based publications including *Race Today*, *Flamingo*, and the *West Indian World* wrote about the emerging black consciousness movements developing around the world as a result of black nations gaining their independence from imperial rule. Olive herself was part of this transnational connection of oppressed people. In 1972 she planned to visit prominent US Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver who was in exile in Algeria. And while that trip was unsuccessful, she did visit China in 1977. Olive took the knowledge and strategies she learned from her travels abroad and employed them in her community.

Like Olive Morris' own history, the history of Soul Power in Britain has been greatly understudied, and this historical distortion and omission has two major implications. The primary result is a US-centred history of Soul Power. The overabundance of literature on race-based social movements in the United States presents that country as the only place in which black freedom efforts were occurring. Though the history of slavery and oppression in the US – which birthed African American culture – cannot be denied, we must extend the geographical boundaries of Soul Power to examine locations outside of the Americas that were also critical in the global movement for black liberation. Second, the Americanisation of Soul Power delegitimises the Black British experience, making black Britons objects in their own history. The local history of grassroots activism and leadership in Britain is often lost, leaving young black Britons to claim other histories and cultures as their own. Local activist Devon Thomas says it best:

[Literature on African American history and culture] tends to flood into here and it gives particularly young people a false sense of what their history's about, cause it's the history of our brothers and sisters but it's not our direct history. It's not the history of the country that you came from and it's not the history of the country that you live in. You gotta write your own history and work out how it connects with that history, you know?²

Organisations such as the Remembering Olive Collective (ROC) are helping to rewrite the history of radical black organising traditions in Britain. Recognising the dearth of information available on Olive Morris, ROC has reconstructed her narrative, and has made Olive's personal papers available to the public. In doing so, the Collective is instilling black Britons with the knowledge of their past, encouraging them to write their own histories and giving them the resources to do so.

I am inspired by individuals like Olive Morris who so fearlessly fought to eradicate racism, sexism and discrimination in Britain and by ROC's efforts to preserve Olive's legacy. For it is through people like Olive – and countless other activists – that the legacy of Soul Power in Britain lives.

² Devon Thomas in a conversation with Ana Laura López de la Torre, recorded on 10 December 2007.