



BLACK RADICAL WO

BLACK RADICAL WOMEN AND JOY

There are some performers whom you watch and their joy is obvious. The people I'm thinking of tend to be strong women who sing political songs: Nina Simone, Ani DiFranco, Toshi Reagon, Jill Scott and Ledisi Young come to mind. They sing about struggle, but they also sing about love, sex and sensuality – all topics with political dimensions. Even through their pain, like Stevie Wonder, these women sing with a joy that is inspiring and intimate. The Olive Morris Collection inspires this type of joy in imagining the thrill of activism in the 1970s, but also the hard graft that went into developing a vision for a future. It's a vision that Olive would want to be, "free of exploitation." So notes Olive's mother, Doris Morris, in an interview about her daughter and her own trade union activism.¹

At the *Black Women in the Radical Tradition* conference held at the City University of New York in March 2009, the conference itself was dedicated to a broad cross-section of radical women and the definition of radical activism ranging from union work, to cultural expression, to housework as a labour issue. In her keynote address, noted freedom fighter and intellectual Angela Davis asked that we consider the multi-dimensionality of black women in freedom struggle. In particular, she wanted to know whether we thought about the joy that black women experienced in their lives.

I'd not considered this simple, but important angle to thinking about black women's lives. So much of our time and energy has, historically, been to documenting black women's resisting and sometimes succumbing to racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist exploitation. If we do, indeed, consider happiness and joy, it is often in spite of oppression and in the cultural realm – almost wholly divorced from political struggle. True, we do have a black tradition of singing songs like *This Little Light of Mine* as a way of uplifting the spirit, but what about, as Davis notes, finding joy in the actual practice of activism?

My previous scholarly work has been dedicated to collecting stories of black women's activism in contemporary America, mostly in the late 1960s and 1970s black feminist movement. One conclusion I reached about why a number of the black feminist organisations of the era no longer existed was because black women running these organisations burned out. There were, undoubtedly, structural issues such as the rise of neoconservatism and a backlash against civil rights and feminist movements. Women in both the US and UK contexts express the simple human fact that as gratifying as it was to have social change successes, raising awareness about patriarchy and white

¹ Interview with Doris Morris held at the Black Cultural Archives.

supremacy through constant and dedicated organising – in addition to full-time employment, caring for families, going to school, printing the flyers, running the alternative school for children, holding workshops for women, and organising rallies – was (and still is) exhausting work.

Yet, these same women also speak of the camaraderie and friendship that they found in the midst of struggle. They may have been at the barricades, but sometimes they actually had a good time doing it. In addition to developing their own leadership skills, becoming better writers, learning to think critically, growing as public speakers, and confronting authority, many of the women interviewed for black women's activism oral history projects tell stories of *having fun*. They laugh as they recall youthful audacity. They smile as they reach for memories of people they've not seen in years, but whom they recall as instrumental in their rebirth as foot soldiers in their chosen struggle. Anarchist Emma Goldman is often quoted as making a link between dancing and revolution. Her exact words, in her 1931 autobiography, were these: "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." If we can push ourselves to think of black women activists as not solely oppressed by gender, race and class, as not terminally mired down in struggle, but also at times joyful at the success of a demo or deeply moved by the companionship of other women, we get a fuller picture of the possibilities for freedom that these women envisioned for themselves, for their children, for the men in the lives, and for black communities as a whole.

But why focus on Olive Morris? Does this mean that all of the other women involved in the Brixton Black Women's Group, the Manchester Black Women's Co-operative, the Black Women's Mutual Aid Group, and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent are not important to the story? Of course not. Their stories are integral to the oral histories in the Olive Morris Collection, as well as in other projects, such as the Black Cultural Archives' *Black Women's Movement* project. However, using one person's life as the starting point for many different roads of inquiry is both useful and inspiring.

Sociologist Belinda Robnett, in her book *How Long? How Long?* (Oxford University Press, 1997), used the notion of a bridge leader in her work on the civil rights movement to mark those women in the movement who served an important intermediate capacity in grassroots organising. Women such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer were, Robnett maintains, the critical link between nationally recognised male leaders and the masses of people. They filled two specific leadership roles: 1) they served as valuable translators of complaints into action and; 2) they linked strategies that sought to change individuals, identity, consciousness and institutions. Black women bridge leaders were key to showing people that they have every right, perhaps even every *obligation* to participate in public life and the institutions that dictate our society. While Robnett addresses leadership within formal organisations, Olive Morris offers a look at someone who easily moved between and made connections with formalised, structured organisations, localised community groups, and broader, but diffuse social change movements.

Olive's work can help us look at leadership more broadly across movements as we take into account nation-specific cultural, social, economic and political contexts. If, at the base of Robnett's argument, the idea that for decades black women's civil rights movement leadership went unrecognised or unnamed because of how leadership is traditionally conceptualised (white, male, educated, middle class), then in attempting to apply bridge leadership to Olive Morris and black British women activists, we must also consider historical timing and nationhood as it shaped black British women's leadership. What did it mean for a young, Jamaican-born woman raised in black and British societies to demand justice from her community and her nation?

In her book *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), scholar-activist Joy James cautions against creating "revolutionary icons" – people whose iconic stature "overshadows the tedious, mundane tasks of non-elite activists." I would extend her concern to how we go about excavating, documenting, explaining and using Olive Morris' life and legacy. There is the temptation to romanticise her life based solely on the photographs of her many confrontations with the power structure and from her evolving political consciousness as evidenced in her Manchester University social science essays. Also, in their reminiscences about Olive, activists of her era easily and understandably, slip into a collective "we" when discussing the formation of political identities. And, of course, the terrible fact that Olive died tragically young contributes to a tendency to freeze her in that moment of political amber.

Thinking about Olive Morris, struggle and joy, is my attempt to resist putting Olive on a pedestal in favour of an objective viewpoint that seeks complexity. My approach to looking at Olive's life is, from a historical and sociological perspective, rooted in interpreting the materials on hand to flesh out a picture of Olive as but one small, but important, part of black women's activism in 1970s Britain.

On a personal level, I can relish the joy that is apparent in the documentary archives and in the stories that her friends, family and comrades tell about her dedication to politics. And as one who sometimes wearies of the struggle, I can look to Olive's legacy as a kick in the pants and imagine her telling me that there is always more work to be done and more joy to be had in doing that work.