Individual Life

“We All Became Black”: Tony Soares, African-American Internationalists, and Anti-imperialism

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“We were all influenced by the events in America, by Malcolm X, by Stokely Carmichael,” UK Black Power activist Tony Soares recalled in a 2011 interview, “That’s what politicized a lot of people.” Soares’s narrative is relatively familiar: the story of a postwar South Asian immigrant to London finding inspiration in contemporaneous African-American struggles for rights and equality. Like many black Britons in the mid 1960s, Soares looked across the Atlantic and drew upon a diverse range of American grassroots organizing models including Black Power and the anti-Vietnam War movement as he developed his activist politics. The political networks he built and the information he disseminated to other black Britons were important to the internationalization of the Freedom Struggle. Soares’s actions demonstrate how UK and US activists reached across national boundaries in a way that facilitated their global consciousness of the fight against white supremacy. In this way, their actions came to be seen as two fronts in a larger worldwide war against imperialism, capitalism, and the structures that fostered white domination.

Soares’s Black Power activism represented just one step in an ongoing path of engagement with leftist, anti-imperialist politics in the United States. Soares remembered that “We were influenced a lot by what was happening in the States before the US Black Panthers,” namely, Vietnam. Soares’s engagement with the African-American freedom struggle was inextricably linked to his involvement in anti-Vietnam War activism. In turn, a number of internationally minded African-American activists saw Soares as an equal and a key comrade in the global anti-imperialist struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These interactions demonstrate that relationships between UK and US black activists were
more symbiotic than have been commonly understood, with political influences traveling across the Atlantic in both directions.

Tony Soares was born Antonio Moushine Leo de Sousa in Portuguese Goa in the mid 1940s. He spent part of his teenage years in Mozambique, where he protested against Portuguese colonialism, before migrating to the United Kingdom to escape persecution for his political activism in 1961. In the United Kingdom, Soares worked a number of low-paid jobs, as a farm laborer, clerical worker, and post office employee.

An iconoclast and independent thinker by nature, Soares moved through a number of black leftist organizations as his political voice evolved. He recalled that he first learned about Black Power, “by reading stuff in the news, [and] eventually discussing it with people.” On June 5, 1967, Soares attended the inaugural meeting of what became known as the Universal Coloured People's Association (UCPA). Soares was among 12 of the 85 founding members present elected to a central committee to lead the nascent organization. Two months later, UCPA leader Obi Egbuna publicly announced the organization's adoption of a Black Power manifesto. The UCPA would become the United Kingdom's first successful Black Power organization. But over time, Soares and other UCPA members grew tired with what they saw as Egbuna's “ego-tripping,” and in April 1968, Egbuna broke with the organization over concerns of ideological weakness. In 1970, Soares joined the North London branch of the UK Black Panther Movement (BPM). Soares's association with the BPM was brief because the organization, “had been infiltrated by the Marxist and Trotskyite groups,” as he recalled. He felt that “ordinary people did not relate to that.” In 1971, Soares helped transform the BPM's North London branch into the Black Liberation Front (BLF). The BLF was a Maoist, cultural nationalist grassroots community organization with ties to the Black Panthers in the United States and close identification with Africa. The BLF was not interested in inciting a revolution in the United Kingdom, rather, their “sole concern was survival for Black people in Britain and socialism in their homelands.”

This chapter draws on an oral history of Tony Soares conducted by the author in 2011 as well as a selection of his manuscript materials that have not been examined by scholars. These include Soares's personal correspondence with African-American activists living in exile in three countries: Robert F. Williams in Beijing, China; Kathleen Neal in Geneva, Switzerland; and Eldridge Cleaver and Bill Stephens of the US Black Panther Party's (USBPP) International Section in Algiers, Algeria. These diverse international locations highlight the geographic fluidity of the African-American freedom struggle in the early 1970s. The chapter also explores Soares's correspondence with the Atlanta office of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, and Williams in Ann Arbor, Michigan, following Williams's return to the United States in 1969. These letters and recollections, I argue, reveal that Soares's transatlantic interactions with African-American civil rights leaders were refracted—physically and ideologically—through black internationalist and third world struggles at that moment. The episodes illustrate the ways in which Soares developed an array of grassroots, anti-imperialist
transnational relationships with other people of color in the late 1960s and early
1970s. These conversations were not solely about race or class or anti-Vietnam
protests; instead, they derived from a broader vision. Activists like Neal, Cleaver,
and Williams wanted to end imperialism’s deleterious effects on the non-Western
world, and Soares reached out to these activists in order to develop intellectual
and political networks with them.

On July 22, 1967, Soares attended the Dialectics of Liberation conference at
the Roundhouse in London along with several of his then-UCPA comrades;
there they heard from US Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael. In his speech,
Carmichael unveiled a powerful vision that promoted local black concerns to
a level of international importance. He introduced Black Power as a provoca-
tive framework for thinking and talking about black oppression in the United
Kingdom, and he framed the British Empire as a common oppressor of people of
color in many parts of the world. Although Carmichael was disappointed with
the largely white leftist audience, whom he found out of touch with anti-colonial
struggles, his words resonated powerfully with listeners like Soares who had
grown up in colonies held by Western European powers.14 Carmichael’s presence
and words encouraged the UCPA members present to embrace their blackness.
“The philosophy at the time,” Soares remembered, “was that all of us who were
non-white who came from countries that were colonized or neo-colonized were
all from the same boat. We were all termed by whites as coloured, [and] we didn’t
like the word coloured . . . So we all became black.”15

While Carmichael’s speech appealed to Soares’ and others’ experiences of
European colonialism, Soares’ inception as an activist concerned with American
Empire came with Vietnam. Soares had read in the news about the anti-Viet-
am war effort in America as early as 1963. He remembered visiting Vietnam
Solidarity campaign events at Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park regularly from
1963 to 1968. On October 27, 1968, Soares attended the large, iconic antiwar
demonstration organized by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.16 Organizers of
that protest claimed that the participants numbered over 100,000.17 Protestors
marched from Hyde Park to the American Embassy Grosvenor Square, display-
ing what an ad hoc committee of march organizers called, “Street Power” by trav-
eling together in groups on the whole route.18 Following the Vietnam Solidarity
Campaign demonstration, Soares was arrested and charged with inciting people
to riot and possess weapons. He served over a year in prison starting in February
1969.19 The Vietnam protest and Soares’s related arrest had revealed significant
interest, both on the part of protestors and the UK government, in America as an
imperial force whose political efforts reached far beyond its national borders.

Soares was captivated by what could be called the anti-imperialist nexus of the
early 1970s: global struggles for racial and working class justice and campaigns for
national self-determination for countries like South Vietnam and Mozambique.
With these interests in mind, Soares reached out to African-Americans who had
inspired him. Soares sought out these connections not because he intended to
imitate their protest models, but because he wanted to build a political meaning
for blackness outside of the US context. Soares located African-Americans where-
ever they were in the world and wrote to them on spec, eager to learn and debate
ideologies. In the process, Soares developed a network of relationships that were vital to his own political maturation, and to the material and intellectual development of the global black freedom struggle.

From his place on the ground in London, a stopover city for many African-Americans’ international tours, Soares bolstered the transnational struggle. He harnessed powerful tools that were often in the quiver of the status quo: passports, publications, correspondence, and international travel. In October 1970, Black Panther Party Communications secretary Kathleen Neal wrote to Soares from Geneva asking for his help in manufacturing two passports, one male and one female.20 This request, like others that black internationalist activists received, led Soares into illegal activities against his own nation state. Neal wanted the passports urgently, as she offered to travel to London if Soares could guarantee their quick production. The production of those passports offered a symbolic and material marker of the significant transnational transfers taking place within the black freedom struggle, as they helped Neal and her son Maceo on their return journey from Pyongyang, North Korea, to Algiers, a trip that had been delayed due to visa problems.21 The North Korean government had hosted Neal, her husband Eldridge Cleaver, and a cohort of Black Panthers who were interested in that country’s *juche* ideology, a form of self-reliance.22

In addition to passports, Soares collected and distributed a plethora of materials—books, pamphlets, and recordings—that helped give black Britons access to African diasporic history and news of the African-American freedom struggle. In 1967, Soares obtained an issue of a little-known publication, *The Aframerican Report*, published by SNCC’s independent press, Student Voice, Inc. The pamphlet consisted of a transcribed, excerpted version of Stokely Carmichael’s October 29, 1966, Black Power speech at the University of California, Berkeley.23 Along with a friend, Soares attempted to sell SNCC’s newsletter in the United Kingdom, but the price of international postage made it too expensive for SNCC to mail it to the United Kingdom.24 The brief exchange between the SNCC office and Soares’s friend illustrates the day-to-day resource challenges faced by activists working to internationalize their movement.

In London, Soares came across a copy of Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) President and Black Power intellectual-activist Robert F. Williams’s *The Crusader* magazine, which he enjoyed reading, and wanted to learn more about. Soares wrote to Williams who responded. Williams sent a copy of his book *Negroes with Guns* (1962), several copies of *The Crusader*, “and we had a bit of a conversation,” Soares recalled.25 Soares became Williams’ colleague on the ground in London, where he distributed copies of *The Crusader* on Williams’ behalf.26 “I was distributing his stuff,” Soares recalled, “mailing it everywhere. Mailing [Mao Zedong’s] *Little Red Books* for him.”27 The interaction fostered the two men’s shared interests in social justice and Maoist ideology, and it engendered a relationship that would aid both of them. Soares recalled that, “Williams meant a lot to me, he influenced me quite a lot… he was very articulate and expressed what a lot of people felt.”28 In Soares’s mind, Williams had the courage to express feelings of pent-up anger surrounding black people’s experiences of discrimination in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere. Soares
noted, however, that “the Chinese government was giving him a lot of help.”29 He recognized that the Chinese government had enabled Williams to speak more freely than blacks in the West could.

The friendship between Soares and Williams was grounded in more than mutual admiration or imitation; the two men believed that they could support each other in the struggle by using their respective networks, which was particularly important in light of the limited resources that both men could access. In November 1971, Williams wrote to Soares from Ann Arbor, Michigan asking for the Black Liberation Front’s aid in helping him to avoid extradition to North Carolina. Williams was being held in prison in Michigan on a kidnapping charge. He noted that out of the five people who had been indicted, he was the only one facing extradition. “They have made it quite obvious that they want to get rid of me for political reasons,” Williams reported. He asked Soares and the BLF to “help me in England” by protesting at the US Embassy and “send[ing] a cable to Premier Chou En-lai asking him to intervene with Nixon on my behalf when he arrives in China for his coming visit.”30 His request indicated his trust for Soares and the BLF as comrades, and it revealed Williams’ keen awareness of the publicity that foreign protest could bring to the United States’ diplomatic efforts abroad. In particular, the presence in London of organizations such as the BLF and the BPM had garnered greater attention for black Britons’ concerns, which Williams hoped Soares might leverage in order to draw attention to the extradition plight. Williams also noted that he was “very glad” to have heard from Soares again, indicating that that relationship benefited both parties.

Soares also published a number of materials that strengthened his knowledge of the cutting edge ideas of the African-American movement’s leaders-in-exile. On the day after his Dialectics of Liberation speech in 1967, Stokely Carmichael exhorted the public from the Speakers’ Corner dais in London’s Hyde Park. Soares was in the audience that day as well, and he kept a copy of the transcript of Carmichael’s speech. Soares later printed the speech as a pamphlet entitled, “The Struggle for Black Power” under the auspices of the Afro-Asian Liberation Front.31

Soares’s publishing work through the Afro-Asian Liberation Front and with the BLF’s newspaper Grass Roots earned him a reputation as a vital link in the struggle’s international communications network. In May 1971, Eldridge Cleaver led a delegation of US Black Panthers to the Congo. When he wanted to produce a pamphlet about what the delegation had learned there, Cleaver contacted Soares in London. Through Stage 1, a publishing arm of the BLF, Soares published Revolution in the Congo later that year.32 Bill Stephens, another member of the BPP’s International Section, wrote to Soares that the pamphlet was a part of their efforts to build the Revolutionary People’s Communication Network (RPCN), “a communication network among the revolution peoples of the world.”33 Soares’s printing of the Congo pamphlet constituted part of his effort to provide information that could, in Stephens’ words, “be exchanged and distributed on an international level between all oppressed and struggling peoples who are actively engaged in the international proletariat revolutions.”34
At a time of cold war, activists like Soares were traveling to and cultivating political relationships with anti-Western countries and ideologies, and this internationalism placed them directly at odds with their own governments. State arms like the UK Special Branch sought to curtail the international political activities of UK residents. Activists who reached out transnationally faced a number of other limitations upon their work, including the need to maintain secrecy about the distribution of their ideological materials, the risks of arrest at public events, and the need to conceal their international travel plans.

An episode from Soares’s life reveals that the ideas of the African-American freedom struggle indeed afforded black UK activists inspiration as well as risks, which were fueled by the UK government’s fears of international revolution. In September 1971, Soares reprinted a page from the US Black Panthers’ newspaper, which included instructions on how to build a Molotov cocktail in the pages of *Grass Roots*. Although *The Black Panther* was widely available in radical bookshops, Soares was arrested on March 9, 1972, upon his return from a visit with the International BPP in Algiers. The Special Branch had raided the BLF’s office and charged Soares with inciting *Grass Roots* readers to commit arson, build bombs, possess firearms, and murder. At trial, the Special Branch produced evidence showing that Soares had sent 25 copies of the newspaper in question overseas. The BLF responded to what appeared to be Soares and the BLF’s victimization by setting up a ‘Free Tony Soares’ campaign, which gained support in the United Kingdom and abroad. Soares was found guilty on March 21, 1973, but much to his surprise, he was sentenced to 200 hours of community service.

Towards Racial Justice (TRJ), an organization associated with the moderate Institute for Race Relations, lodged the criticism that Soares and the BLF had simply imported African-American rhetoric. TRJ reported that because black people in the United Kingdom felt deeply about the circumstances of their oppression, they often resorted to “rhetoric imported from the US,” which was likely to be violently charged. The criticism seemed to undermine the meaningful links with African-American counterparts that the BLF and others had created.

On August 6, 1972, Eldridge Cleaver wrote to Soares exhorting him, “The struggle cannot afford to lose good, dedicated comrades like yourself.” Cleaver wrote in response to the news that Soares had been granted bail after four months in prison on the *Grass Roots* arrest charges. Cleaver’s choice of phrase—“the struggle”—indicated the reason behind their mutual correspondence. That is, Cleaver thought of Soares as a comrade. Cleaver had initially reached out to Soares for help printing *Revolution in the Congo*, but the interactions had grown into a full-fledged friendship in which the two men exchanged ideas and thoughts candidly with each other. The two men shared a belief that international communications networks were vital to the success of the black freedom struggle.

Perhaps inadvertently, Tony Soares positioned himself at the center of the global black freedom struggle. He did so in words—through engaging in intellectual debates and demonstrations of solidarity across borders—and in actions—through backstopping African-American internationalist activists in their liberation efforts and in recruiting other blacks in Briton to the cause of global
black freedom. While Soares’s actions, like those of any individual activist, may have had a negligible effect on the outcome of the global black freedom struggle, his efforts suggest a significant commitment to internationalism vis-a-vis transatlantic transfer. More than simple expressions of solidarity, these transfers constituted truly transnational links that were refracted through the lens of third world anti-imperialist struggles. Williams, Cleaver, and Neal had remarkably internationalist worldviews and their work in Beijing, Pyongyang, and Algiers interlinked their fates with that of Soares. Soares, for his part, identified and established these interconnections, reaching out to African-American comrades wherever they were in the world.

Notes

5. Soares, 6:30.
6. Soares, 8:00.
7. Soares, 4:00.
11. Wild, “Black was the colour of our fight,” 104–109.
18. “Street Power: Briefing to All Demonstrators, 1968,” in MSS.21/3369/29, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.


28. Soares, 10:00.

29. Soares, 10:45.


34. Ibid.


40. Eldridge Cleaver to Tony Soares, August 6, 1972, in Soares private collection.

41. Rosalind Wild chronicles the arrest and trial of Tony Soares in Wild, pp. 188–190.