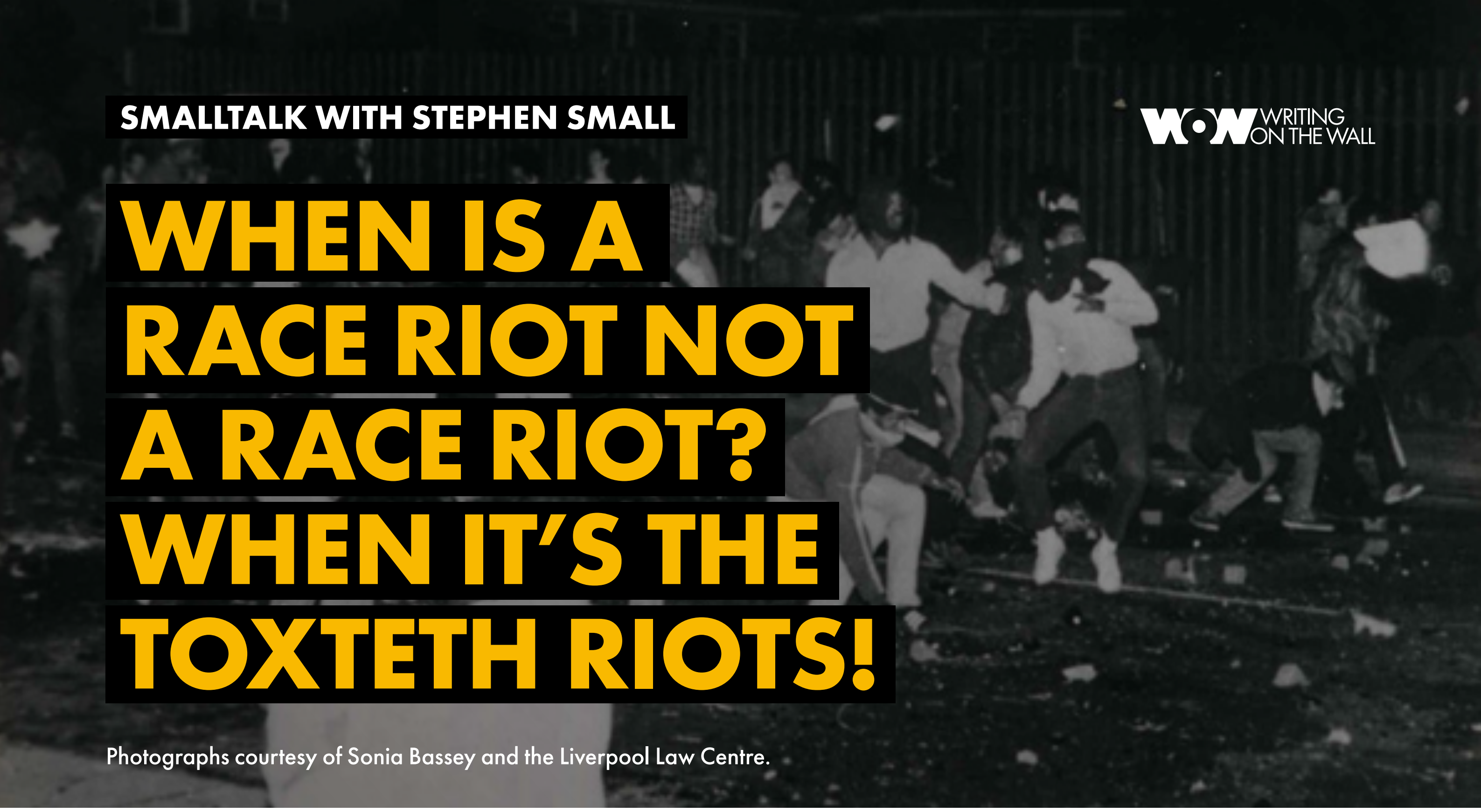

SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

WRITING ON THE WALL

WHEN IS A RACE RIOT NOT A RACE RIOT? WHEN IT'S THE TOXTETH RIOTS!

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

When is a race riot not a race riot? When it's in Toxteth in 1981.

It wasn't a race riot because race riots happen in the United States, involve white people attacking and murdering Black people, typically for no reason at all, with the support of the police and government (and the Ku Klux Klan). But what happened in Toxteth involved Black people and a lot of white people together fighting against the police. It wasn't a race riot because race wasn't the only issue. It's impossible to explain what happened without reference to poverty and class disadvantage and age differences. Or without reference to gender and the experiences of Black women compared with Black men. Institutional racism was absolutely important, but to make it the only issue – as most people did at that time – is only slightly worse than ignoring it altogether.

It wasn't a riot because the word 'riot' is a politically charged word used by the government, the police and the media to define people involved in social protest as irresponsible, chaotic and criminal. There were some rioters, it's true, but they were not the main group, or the largest group. And it wasn't a riot in Toxteth because it happened in Liverpool 8, which is **NOT** Toxteth despite what the most media continue to write. Liverpool 8 (also known as the Granby Triangle) is in fact a small district within Toxteth where the vast majority of Black people in the city lived at that time.

Anyone Black that stepped out of Liverpool 8 into other parts of Toxteth – beyond Park Road or beyond Smithdown Road in the other direction, risked verbal abuse, physical abuse or worse. The same was true for white friends, including white women who were dating Black men. Everyone in Liverpool 8 knew that.

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People didn't seem to notice it wasn't a race riot at all. The press called it a race riot, so did television and radio. Police and politicians called it a race riot too, and so did international reporters. They called it a race riot because they thought that what happened in Liverpool 8 was the same as the United States. And they thought it was the same as what happened in the so-called race riots in other English cities – in Brixton, Handsworth, and Moss Side. There were some similarities with these cities but looks were deceiving and first impressions were wrong. Calling it a race riot was a quick and easy way to take something complicated and simplify it. But it wasn't that simple.

What happened across England in 1981 has been called disturbances, disorders, protests, rebellions and insurrections. They have also been called riots. But instead of the Toxteth riots, I prefer to call what happened the Liverpool 8 uprising. A phrase I got from local resident and analyst Jimi Jagne. He was there, he witnessed it first-hand, and he has analysed and written about what happened many times. They began after a long history of police harassment of local Black men and women – and boys and girls. Harsh treatment of the black community in Liverpool that goes back decades, generations, centuries even. This treatment had worsened with the advent of the so-called SUS law (aka stop and search) which seemed to give police free rein to do whatever they wanted with young black people. The protests were the result of Black people being ignored, neglected, and rejected for decades, for generations and actually for centuries. There were similarities with other cities, with Black populations squeezed into neighbourhoods with poor housing, high unemployment, limited educational provision and inadequate services. Neighbourhoods with histories of institutional racism and discrimination, continuous police surveillance, harassment and even persecution of young black men and women. Police harassment intensified since the 1970s by the police of SUS and stop and search. As one local Black resident told me for a book I'm writing, 'for us, in those days we faced racist skinheads, football fans and white gangs. And the police were just another gang – with more resources'.

Compared to other cities, Liverpool was different due to the unique circumstances in the city at the start of the 1980. These differences were profound and consequential, and these differences still resonate painfully in the continued racism and injustice that continues to plague Black people in the city today, in 2021, forty years after the protests. These differences mean that Liverpool can't be treated in the same way as other cities; and that's the point of these articles.

This year – July 2021 – is the fortieth anniversary of the Liverpool 8 uprisings. They began after a long history of police harassment of local Black men and women – and boys and girls. On Friday July 3, 1981 Leroy Cooper was manhandled and arrested near Granby Street. On Saturday July 4th a series of protests and riots broke out, and on Sunday they became intense and expanded. They continued intermittently in the following weeks and erupted again in late July. Buildings, shops and cars were damaged or destroyed; several hundred police officers and a number of civilians were injured, hundreds of people were arrested. Upper Parliament Street was the front line, and the sight of young Black and white boys and men driving milk floats – and even a mechanical digger into police cars and buildings was unparalleled in Great Britain. Debates about the cause and catalyst of the uprisings continued for months, and Toxteth was added to the report set up to investigate the so-called Brixton Disorders by Lord Scarman.

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This July 2021 press reports, television documentaries, commemorations and other activities will take place across the nation. What happened will be described, dissected, evaluated, assessed and dismissed. And the so-called riots will be compared with one another, and almost certainly with race riots in the United States. Commentators will ask whether things have changed in Liverpool 8 over the last forty years, and whether the conditions facing the Black community in Liverpool 8 differ from the past. On first impressions, it will look like a great deal has changed. They will see the multiple reports and statements of commitment by local politicians and major employers, a formal apology for Liverpool's role in transatlantic slave trade, an International Slavery Museum – the largest in Europe – and tireless work by local Black and multi-racial community organisations, many run or managed by local Black women. The apparent frenzy of activity following the killing of George Floyd in the United States in 2020, and the emergence of a Black Lives Matter movement, makes it look like even more is happening. And yet, looks are deceiving.

People outside the city will be surprised to learn about the continuing institutional racism and racial inequality, and the continued confinement of most Black people in the city into the neighbourhood of Liverpool 8. They'll be surprised to learn about the much higher rates of unemployment experienced by Black people compared to non-Blacks, and the dismal number of Black faces working in city centre shops; surprised at how a colonized education system still dominates Liverpool schools and colleges; how Black people have experienced a much more intense adverse impact of the public health crisis and the lock down. But Black people and others in Liverpool 8 will not be surprised because they continue to live these experiences first-hand.

To understand why the Liverpool 8 uprisings in 1981 were different you have to understand how Liverpool in 1981 differed – politically and economically – from all the other major cities where protests occurred. You have to understand Liverpool as 'the slaving capital of the world' and its proud reputation as Great Britain's second city of Empire (after London). You have to understand how transatlantic slavery turned the village of Liverpool into a town, and brought riches, jobs and economic activities to tens of thousands of white people. And how British imperialism turned the town of Liverpool into a city – bringing even more riches, jobs and economic activity.

To understand why the Liverpool 8 uprisings in 1981 were different you have to understand why the Black population in Liverpool 8 – our history, national, ethnic and family origins, and our citizenship, were different from Black people in every other city at that time. You have to understand how our memory of Liverpool's role in the slave trade in Liverpool differed from the memory of slavery held by Black people in other cities in England. You have to understand how enforced racial segregation over multiple generations confined the vast majority of Black people into one neighbourhood, known as Liverpool 8 (and sometimes as the Granby Triangle). And you have to understand how Liverpool in general and Black people in particular experienced far worse economic conditions and more severe unemployment through the 1980s than in other cities.

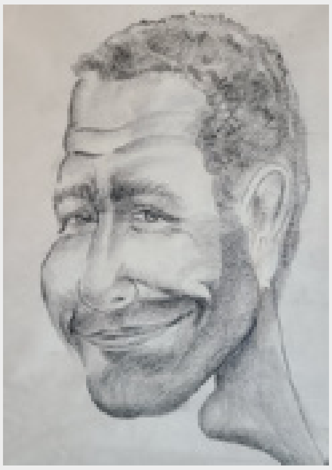
> **We have never stopped our opposition to the dominant, distorted and biased history told in schools.**

And you have to understand that during all this time – during slavery, imperialism and right up to the Liverpool 8 uprisings themselves – Black women and men have never remained silent. We have never stopped our opposition to racism, discrimination and injustice. Whether in housing, employment, health or policing. We have never stopped our opposition to the dominant, distorted and biased history told in schools. Our voices were always articulated, our analysis always penetrating and our messages loud and clear. But we were silenced and kept out of Liverpool politics and civic debates, silenced and kept out of schools and universities, silenced and kept out of museums and exhibits; for far too long. But we persevered and we continue to persevere today.

In the following weeks I'll tell you exactly what happened in Liverpool 8 in July 1981; I'll tell you what happened in the protests and so-called riots across England that year. I'll tell you exactly how and why the Black population and the Black experience in Liverpool is unique in England, and how it contrasts with the Black experience in every other city in the nation. I'll tell you about the unique experiences of Black women in Liverpool – not just as victims of racism but so as social activists who have worked to shape their own destinies. I'll tell you about statues, memorials and street signs that continue to glorify and venerate Liverpool slavers and Liverpool imperialists. I'll share with you many Black voices from the city, our experiences, our knowledge and our analysis of the city. And I'll tell you what Liverpool 8 looks like in 2021, 40 years after the riots; and what this means for our understanding of race and racism in Liverpool and Great Britain at the present time.

WE ARE NOT BLACK HOOLIGANS

My sincere thanks for their advice, suggestions and comments to **Jimi Jagne, Madeline Heneghan, Gloria Hyatt, Terry Small and Leona Vaughn.**



Professor Stephen Small

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Stephen Small is a Professor in the Department of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies where he has taught since 1995; and he is Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (since June 2020). He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his MS.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979). He researches the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe.

His most recent book is 20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe published in January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: Inside the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana, to be published in 2022. He is currently writing a book on Slavery, Imperialism and their legacies in Black Liverpool. As part of that project, he's investigating the voices and visions of Black men and women from across Africa and the diaspora in anti-colonial movement for self-determination. He is co-editor of Black Europe and the African Diaspora, 2009.

Stephen is a child of the Windrush Generation, his dad having arrived in England from Jamaica in 1946. He was born and raised in Liverpool – the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).