

BLACK LIVERPOOL 1981 AS A RACIAL ANOMALY

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

To understand why the Liverpool 8 uprisings in 1981 were different from what happened in other cities, you have to understand how the city of Liverpool in 1981 differed – politically, economically and socially – from other cities.

You have to understand the city's role 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 the British slave trade and slavery (from the 1500s to 1830s) turned the village of Liverpool into a town and made a lot of people rich. And you have to understand how British imperialism (from the 1870s to the 1930s) turned the town of Liverpool into a city and made a lot of people even richer. You have to understand how Liverpool created a myth of racial harmony and racial integration, despite the indisputable evidence of racism, segregation and the vile abuse poured on people in inter-racial relationships and marriages. An image that had little or nothing to do with reality. And that's the truth, Ruth.

There were four major differences between Black Liverpool and the other major cities in England in which Black people lived in the 1980s, like London, Birmingham, and Manchester, for example. First, was the Black population of the city – our history, national,

ethnic and family origins and our citizenship. The majority of Black people in every major city in England were West Indian immigrants and their children, and the majority of families involved two Black parents. But in Liverpool the majority of Black people were African or of mixed African and white origins, and overwhelmingly British-born. A very large proportion of Black families were composed of white mothers and African or mixed-race fathers, or some other mixture.

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One of the most accomplished writers on the history of Black Liverpool, Ray Costello, has traced our community origins to the early 1700s. Mark Christian and Carleton Wilson have written about the 20th century in detail. And if you don't like books, Lawrence Westgaph has been doing street tours for more than a decade, just as Eric Lynch and Dorothy Kuya had done before him. From the first time Great Britain got into the business of buying, selling and enslaving Africans in the 1550s, they kept Black people out of Britain. The tiny numbers allowed in came mainly from the Americas, especially the Caribbean. That pattern changed from the middle of the 19th century and the Liverpool

experience diverged from every other city in England. Outside Liverpool most Black settlers in England were West Indian, mainly men, but with a significant number of women. Inside Liverpool most Black settlers were West African and probably more than 95% of them men. The biggest group were sailors on ships built by Cammell Laird and operated by the Elder Dempster Company owned by Alfred Lewis Jones. There were also tiny numbers of students. In other words, in 1981, Black people in Liverpool were not the children or parents of 20th century West Indian immigrants (currently called the Windrush Generation) assimilating to British society. We were – and are – the African and mixed African/British citizens of Black Liverpool.

Second, was the experience of enforced racial segregation over multiple generations that confined the vast majority of Black people into one neighbourhood, known as Liverpool 8 (and sometimes as the Granby Triangle). In the other cities, Black people lived in underprivileged neighbourhoods just like us, but never everybody in just one area. Nor did they go to school, work in jobs, socialise in parks and playgrounds or go to nightclubs in one area. In London they lived in Brixton, Peckham and Lewisham, Hackney, Shepherds Bush and Notting Hill; in Birmingham they lived in Handsworth, Nechells and Winsome Green; in Manchester, in Moss Side and Salford.

But we were all in Liverpool 8. We had first been confined to Liverpool 1, also known as sailor town, but moved up the hill to Liverpool 8 mostly after the Second World War. Black people often tried to move out of Liverpool 8 to areas with better housing and better schools, but the city council systematically discriminated against us. And those who moved out of the area, sometimes not more than a mile or two, faced verbal abuse. In schools our children were called racist names and told to go back to Africa. A special term of racist abuse was reserved for white women married to Black men – the ‘n-word lover’. I saw that written on my own mum’s doorsteps several times. No Black faces could be seen working in shops or department stores in the city centre – not in Lewis’s or Blacklers, not in Henry Lee or T J Hughes. And absolutely not in any of the insurance companies, banks, or maritime industries on Water Street, Chapel Street or at the Pier Head. Forget that. In those days, you were more likely to see a polar bear than a Black face in any of those places. And today’s not so different by the way. Truth is that Black people visiting Liverpool from other cities were stunned by the almost complete lack of Black faces in city centre shops; and

we were stunned too when we went to other cities and saw Black people working in the city centre. This was true even in Manchester – a city just 30 miles away – but seemingly a million miles away in terms of our representation in city shops.

Segregation in Liverpool was so bad that some people called Liverpool 8 a Bantustan – the epitome of vicious racial segregation during apartheid in South Africa. Bantustans were inferior and derelict pieces of land set aside by the white power structure of South Africa. They were specially designed to segregate, immiserate and humiliate Black South Africans. Anyone stepping out of a Bantustan in South Africa without white authorisation faced violence, brutality or death. That was far worse than Liverpool 8 but the name captured how we sometimes felt. And, as Bob Marley told us – “who feels it knows it”. In other words, in Liverpool we understood the geography of racism, and we recognised the dangers of certain spaces – like football matches themselves, the city centre on the days of football matches and certain nightclubs. And we knew about spaces of safety, like the streets and avenues of Liverpool 8, and the African nightclubs where we were entertained.

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Third, were the extreme economic conditions and unemployment in Liverpool as a whole up to and through the 1980s. And these experiences were even worse for the Black residents of Liverpool 8 than for others in the city. For example, when hundreds of thousands of West Indians settled in Great Britain from the 1940s very few of them settled in Liverpool because there were so few jobs. By the 1980s, Black people in all major cities in England were over-represented in lower-level jobs, higher levels of unemployment and in poverty. They had fewer educational achievements than white people and were over-concentrated in a limited number of residential districts with poor housing and consistently negative interactions with the police force. Black women faced the combined impacts of racism and sexism and had limited resources to enable them to improve educational attainments and find rewarding work.

But the situation was worse for Black people in Liverpool. For two reasons beyond the dire economic situation for the city as a whole. First, in Liverpool there were concentrated effects because all Black people live in one area. So, there were streets, housing estates and tenements, where 70% of Black people were unemployed. Second, while Black people in London, Birmingham and Manchester were primarily first and second-generation immigrants, our community had been resident in Liverpool for decades, generations and even centuries. While white people explained away racial inequality in those other cities as a result of recent immigration that song rang hollow in Liverpool.

And fourth, in Liverpool our memory of Liverpool's role in the slave trade differed from the memory of slavery held by Black people in other cities. Black people in other cities had limited community experience or memory of the slave trade and slavery in their cities, in part because they had only been there a couple of generations. In contrast, the Black community in Liverpool held a vivid and almost palpable memory of trans-Atlantic slavery and its legacies, a memory which had been cultivated and shared over decades, generations and even centuries. We knew the names of Liverpool politicians, slave traders and families that got rich on the backs of Blacks. We knew how the impressive port and harbour structures owed their origins to finances from slavery, as did so many statues, streets and buildings. We had seen the images of Africans on city centre buildings, the Town Hall and at the Pier Head. We had seen statues of Christopher Columbus, Henry the Navigator and Charles Darwin at the Palm House in Sefton Park. We had clues that Canning Street, Huskisson Street and Gambier Terrace were part of our colonial past.

By the way, we got none of this information from schools – their mission was to colonise our minds, not to liberate them. We got the truth from local notables, as I said before, like Sandra Antigua, Dorothy Kuya, Chief Angus Chukwuemeka, Jimmy Rogers, and Wally Brown. Far more writings by the sons and daughters of Black Liverpool were to follow.

So, there you are. In 1981, Black Liverpool shared much in common with Black people in other cities – but there were significant differences too and they must be considered and taken into account.

Let me end by saying it's a mistake to think that Black people in Liverpool accepted these conditions; we did not. We have always challenged racism. We have always formed groups and organisations for social change and we have always created alliances for social justice. We have always opposed the dominant, distorted, and biased history told in schools. Our analysis was always penetrating, our messages well-articulated and our voices 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. But we didn't give up and we continued to persevere. Just as we do today, in 2021.



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



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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).