SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

WRITING ON THE WALL

BLACK WOMEN AND BLACK SISTERS IN LIVERPOOL

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

The predominant voices that people heard about the Liverpool 8 uprisings – about the who, what, when, where and why they happened – were the voices of white people, especially men.

They also heard more voices of Black men than Black women. But Black women actually had a lot to say, and they weren't hesitant to say it either. That's because they had first-hand personal experience, key insights and clear messages about the causes and consequences of what happened. Even before 1981 they had given evidence to local and national government, written reports and articles, given interviews in newspapers, and produced a book or two on issues facing the Black community in general and Black women in particular. But the men with most of the power – local, regional and national – just wouldn't listen to them as much as they listened to one another. So, Black women persevered.

What did Black women say about the uprisings and what was their broader message? Dorothy Kuya was a long-time resident of Liverpool 8, an unceasing champion for social justice and the first Community Relations Officer appointed in Liverpool in 1970. She had many discussions with the police, employers and schools to combat discrimination and promote social justice. When she was asked why the uprisings had happened, she responded:

"These things don't happen in a vacuum; they happen because people in the end lose their patience. The anger builds up, the tension builds up ... they're not getting a hearing about the issues they're angry about and so in the end it's not that I think people deliberately say let's go out and start a riot ... and I remember always what Martin Luther King said about race riots he said ... that riots are the language of the unheard. In other words, people don't get a listening and they find in the end they have to go on the streets to get people to listen."

> **Riots are the language of the unheard. In other words, people don't get a listening and they find in the end they have to go on the streets to get people to listen.**

Maria O'Reilly had spent all her life working on equality and justice and as a teenager had been influenced in particular by Angela Davis. She became Senior Community Relations Officer for Merseyside Community Relations Council and later on for the Liverpool 8 Law Centre. She also worked in several local Black and multi-racial organisations including Liverpool Black Sisters, the Consortium of Black Organisations, the Liverpool 8 Defence Committee and

the Liverpool Black Caucus. Speaking many years later about the Liverpool 8 uprisings she said:

"The reason that the riots happened was because of police brutality. They dressed it up as disadvantage, poor employment, education and all the usual discriminatory things that were happening ... that was not the issue. The issue was that white men in uniforms were going out regularly... into Liverpool 8, no markings on the vans ... beating up the children ... abusing their mothers."

> **The issue was that white men in uniforms were going out regularly... into Liverpool 8, no markings on the vans... beating up the children... abusing their mothers."**

Gloria Hyatt, another long-time campaigner, who had overcome tremendous obstacles as a young person and eventually became Co-ordinator of the Elimu Study School and the first Black Head School Teacher in Liverpool argued that the Liverpool 8 uprisings were a significant turning point:

"The Toxteth uprisings were a catalyst for change in how schools engaged with the Black community. Elimu acted as a bridge, advocating for more equitable treatment of Black pupils, the inclusion of Black history and role models in teaching and the curriculum. Schools began to recognise us as equal partners in the education of the Black child."

> **The Toxteth uprisings were a catalyst for change in how schools engaged with the Black community.**

Many other women provided insights too, like Sonia Bassey and Claire Dove. Not forgetting Michelle Charters and the more than one hundred members of Liverpool Black Sisters (LBS). LBS began in the 1970s and was expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. It still forms part of the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre today. Many women before them had already set high standards of resistance and self-determination, including Sandra Antigua, Geraldine Ambrosius (known affectionately as 'Cookie') and Carlene Montoute. Protasia Torkington worked for decades to improve the physical and mental health of Black women (helping Black men and boys, too). Limited space doesn't allow me to mention everyone.

Black women helped everyone in the community. They were well-represented – and sometimes the majority in Black and community organizations – including the Consortium of Liverpool Black Organisations, and Mary Seacole House. They targeted life-threatening issues confronting Black women, including their physical and mental health. They confronted the racism and sexism Black women faced because of their natural hair, body image or sexual identity and preferences. They were fed up with being called 'beef', 'bird', and worse. These issues were typically described at the time as the result of 'triple oppression' (meaning, racism, sexism and class).

Mary Seacole House opened as a refuge and safe space for everyone, and especially addressed the mental health needs of Black women. Liverpool Black Sisters prioritised life-enhancing issues like childcare facilities so that Black women could pursue education and jobs. They created courses and training to further Black women's knowledge, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-awareness. They taught about Black women's roles and contributions in history and in contemporary society – in Africa, the Caribbean and England – courses in which Black women (and children) rather than just Black men were central. Black women were far more invested in finding solutions to the obstacles confronting children – and eradicating the nasty pervasive racist stereotypes in schools and media. In framing their ideas, they were influenced by Black America, West Africa and the West Indies. And by their own families in Liverpool itself.

Black women campaigned for better education, for example, in the fight over racism at Paddington Comprehensive School and in protests against skin-head violence, for example, during the 1972 Falkner Street attacks. They were at the forefront of campaigns against police harassment including protesting the racism of Kenneth Oxford (Chief Constable of Merseyside Police). They were at the front too, after the 1981 uprising, combating the narrow-minded class-based – and supposedly colour-blind – politics of Militant Tendency and Liverpool City Council. Black women later helped transform the content and modus operandi of the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery, which opened in 1994. They changed it from a narrow focus on the so-called slave trade to a much broader focus on Africa before European colonization. Their voices around how Black women and families would be treated in the gallery were also transformative. Black women in Liverpool created solutions as founders, members and leaders of organisations and campaigns.

They actively worked to secure the rights of citizenship. They also built alliances and partnerships with other ethnic and religious groups. And their activities have continued to the present day.

When I think about this range of initiatives and activities it reminds me of the most well-known Black women's organisation in the United States in the 1890s, the National Association of Colored Women. Their motto was 'We Believe in the Wholly Impossible. Lifting Others as We Climb". It fits very well with what Black women have always done in Liverpool.

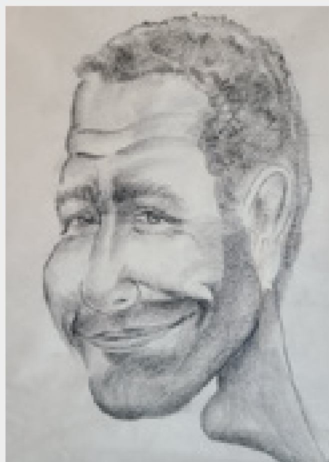
Now, let's remember that women are the majority of the Black community in Liverpool – and in pretty much every Black community across Great Britain. The inequality and discrimination that they face are compounded by the way racism and sexism continually intersect. Women earn less pay than men and continue to experience the worst work conditions. They face widespread sexual objectification and the threat of violence. And they still have far more responsibility for family and children. So, any analysis of what's going on which fails to draw directly and extensively on their experiences is bound to be deficient.

How do we know all of this? Well, Black women have left a written record of what they've been doing all these years. Black women are far less likely to write books that appear in the mainstream and that's another indicator of the demands upon them. But there are huge amounts of writings and records that exist in archives – evidence delivered at city and parliamentary meetings, annual reports, monthly reports, newsletters and magazines like Black Lynx, Charles Wootton News, Elimu Study School, Steve Biko reports – and many other Black organisations too. There are multiple interviews in local and national newspapers and journals. And there are also several Master's Degree theses. New writings are being produced across a wide range of social media and they are easily accessible.

Recently I re-read the excellent book by the staff at Mary Seacole House – 'Their Untold Stories'[1]. They confronted indifference, bureaucratic inertia and insensitivity; as well as direct opposition – tactics so common to the various forms of institutional racism in Liverpool and across Great Britain at that time and today. But they persevered and they succeeded. The women that wrote this book remind us that in telling our own stories, we can have a far more important and long-lasting cathartic effect. And like our ancestors, we're providing insights for future generations. We need to encourage the current generation in the twenty-first century to access these documents and write about them, so we have a clear record of these struggles for future generations.

[1] Ntombenhle Protasia Khoti Torkington (editor) – Their Untold Stories, 2009.

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



Professor Stephen Small

Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies, University of California, Berkeley

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).