SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

STATUES, STREETS AND BUILDINGS

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

For decades, generations and even centuries, Liverpool city elders in politics business and universities built statues and named streets and buildings to celebrate, glorify and revere the men that colonised African lands, exploited African labour and transported millions of Africans into vicious British slavery.

They venerated the men that made Liverpool 'the slaving capital of the world' and helped Great Britain become the only empire 'on which the sun never sets'. Men with power and finances also built clubs and societies where they celebrated their achievements and wined and dined in style. Places where their children – and their children's children – could continue to live a lavish lifestyle. Statues like Huskisson and Gladstone, streets like Canning and Cunliffe, Penny, Earle and Parr, buildings like Liverpool Town Hall and Abercromby Square.

Statues, streets and buildings are the physical embodiment of partiality and bias; they were dedicated to creating a distorted, problematic and even mythological memory of the Liverpool slave trade and slavery. They privileged the experiences and memories of elite white men – occasionally women – and avoided, sidelined and annihilated the brutality, violence and exploitation that was the daily reality for Black women and men during slavery. Buildings that housed elite clubs, crammed with portraits of great white men and the events that made them famous – like the Racquets Club on Upper Parliament Street – were a constant reminder to Black people of the endemic racism and injustice that has shaped our lives ever since. That's why these buildings were targeted in 1981.

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By the way, statues, streets and buildings are also a reminder of British imperialism. Today, everyone is talking about the legacies of slavery, but almost no one is talking about the legacies of Imperialism. And yet, in 1981, far more physical legacies of imperialism were visible in Black people's lives – even if we didn't realise it – than were those of slavery. Most structures from slavery had disappeared, but imperial structures were still there. Like the Racquets Club and the Three Graces at the Pier Head; and like St George's Hall and the

Philharmonic Hall. Like the Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish Synagogue and Streatlam Tower on Princes Road. They are all the living legacy of imperialism – also admired, revered and celebrated. Imperial structures still confront us daily, we pass by them daily and we live in their shadows. We knew little or nothing about the origins of these buildings in 1981; we paid little or no attention to most of them back then; and we know very little about them today, in 2021. Who designed and built them, who paid for them, where did the funds came from and who has maintained them? In other words, the buildings we actually know about are just the tip of the iceberg, and a teeny tiny tip at that.

Is it any wonder that statues, street names and buildings were targeted during the 1981 uprisings? In fact, targeting them was an end in itself and a means to an end. As an end in itself, it showed that we didn't celebrate their existence or the achievements of the men they commemorated. We didn't celebrate their exclusive and elite clubs and lifestyles. In fact, we resented them.

And targeting them was also a means to an end, for example, a means to challenge the institutional racism rampant in Liverpool schools and universities. Because schools and universities fulfilled similar roles and achieved similar goals as statues, streets and buildings. In 1981, Liverpool schools told us that slavery was a rescue mission to save barbaric Africans from cannibalism, idleness and idolatry, and for their spiritual salvation through Christianity. That slavery was no more demanding than the labour performed by white working-class men, women and children in the factories of northern cities. That slavery was abolished by great men like William Wilberforce and William Roscoe and that imperialism was designed to civilise and modernise Africans.

They didn't tell us about the brutality, violence and exploitation of enslaved labour in the Caribbean; or the backbreaking labour forced on African children women and men in their own lands. And they didn't tell us about the vast profits from gold and diamonds in Southern Africa, or the profits from palm oil, rubber and cocoa in West Africa. Don't underestimate the significance of palm oil. It was used extensively to lubricate machinery in factories and railway lines during the second industrial revolution. And it was big. As early as the 1820s, for example, Merseyside factories produced more soap than London, and Merseyside was the capital of soap exports in the whole of Britain. Later on, palm kernel oil was indispensable in the mass production of margarine, a cheap substitute for butter. And William Lever probably produced more soap, candles and margarine than anyone else in the whole of Britain. And they didn't tell us about the low wages, hard labour and exploitation of African men on Elder Dempster Ships either.

Targeting statues, streets and buildings was a means to an end because renaming or removing statues on its own won't transform schools and universities, won't lead to our empowerment and healing. That's why Black women and men during the uprisings demanded better education and better opportunities. That's why they demanded Black history and better curricula, better role models in schools, more diversified staff and better access to resources. Everything that we now call decolonising education. And that's why calling what happened in 1981 "riots" – as if they were mainly about random destruction – is a mistake.

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In 1981, Black people in Liverpool didn't have physical structures to commemorate our achievements or celebrate our heroes. No statues were built, and no streets or buildings named after Black women and men that achieved the impossible in the face of racism and brutality. We didn't own or manage museums with precious artefacts from Africa – like the Benin Bronzes in Liverpool Museums. We knew important people and events existed, but we didn't know their names at that time. People like Sam Sharp and Nanny

of the Maroons in Jamaica, like Bussa's rebellion in Barbados and Quamina's revolt in Guyana. Like Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere, who led African nations to independence. That's why we looked mainly to Black America at that time – to people like Martin Luther King and Angela Davis, Malcom X and Stokely Carmichael.

We didn't have physical structures, but we always challenged racism. In our community centres, churches and homes. We created Black organisations that challenged what the statues and streets and buildings – and the schools and universities – were doing to our minds. That's right, colonising them. That why we established the Charles Wootten Centre, Elimu Wa Nane, Liverpool Black Sisters and Mary Seacole House. That's why the Caribbean Carnival and the Caribbean Centre emerged – helping us on the path to decolonisation and so we could take part in joyful and life affirming activities. That's how we found out about Pastor Daniels Ekarte (and the African Churches Mission). And it's why Joe Farrag campaigned so hard to get the Black Merchant Seaman memorial in Falkner Square.

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We challenged racism and dehumanisation in poetry and arts too. In the lyrics of Bob Marley and Peter Tosch, Steel Pulse and the Real Thing. In the poetry of Eugene Lang and Levi Tafari. In the writings of Ray Costello, Mark Christian, Protasia Torkington, Mike Boyle, Donna Palmer, Madeline Heneghan and Emy Onuora. In writings by the Liverpool Area Profile Group and the Liverpool Black Caucus, as well as by many of our allies and supporters. And we're still doing that now. Last year Dave Clay published his insightful and authentic biography – **A Liverpool Black History, 100 years, 1919-2019**. It's a must-read book. Wally Brown just completed his own biography – a fascinating and compelling story of growing up in Liverpool 8 since the 1940s. It'll be out soon. And I understand a history of Liverpool Black Sisters is being written and I'm looking forward to reading it.

In May 2021, as I was writing these articles, the University of Liverpool announced that they are renaming the Gladstone Hall student building after Dorothy Kuya. It's about time, too. William Gladstone attended Eton and Oxford and went on to become Prime Minister of Great Britain on four separate occasions. He made key decisions on British imperialism across Africa, India and Ireland. Liverpool built a statue to him in 1904 which still exists in St John's Gardens behind St George's Hall. A bust of William Gladstone was unveiled in Seaforth in 2013. His dad was John Gladstone, and William achieved all this because of his dad's massive wealth and elite connections. His dad owned multiple plantations across the West Indies, where he enslaved thousands of children, women and men, from cradle to grave. He vigorously opposed abolition of slavery and when it was abolished, he received the equivalent today of tens of millions of pounds compensation for the loss of his human property. He got more money than any other English man that owned Black bodies at that time. Is it any wonder we object to the statues, streets and buildings that dominate the landscape of Liverpool?

Dorothy Kuya stood for fairness and justice and was a tireless campaigner for racial equality. Born and raised in Liverpool she was active in many struggles and held many positions for social justice across the city. She campaigned in London too, in multiple positions, including working with Bernie Grant. Back in Liverpool she worked to protect the values of houses on Granby Street, organised tours of Black history in the city and worked actively with the International Slavery Museum (ISM). The ISM has a large collection of Dorothy's original papers and documents. Let's hope Liverpool University and the ISM will do the right thing and publish Dorothy's legacy to the people of Liverpool.

Right now, the University of Liverpool is looking at all other buildings too. Buildings named after the Tate and the Lever families are high on the list. That's good and an end in itself. But renaming or removing buildings should also be a means to an end. They should lead onto more productive, life enhancing and life-affirming changes. Black people need real changes in our lives. We need better curricula, better role models, a more diversified staff, better opportunities and better access to resources. Now I'd like to see a monument built to celebrates changes like that.

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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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).