

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS – AND THE BEAT GOES ON!

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

I decided to write these articles because I was unhappy with the way the protests in Liverpool 8 in 1981 were called the Toxteth riots. And how they were called race riots.

It irritated me because they were not riots and they were not in Toxteth as whole. It irritated me because the voices of Black women and men in Liverpool 8 – the very people that had the most personal experiences, the most knowledge and the most insights to provide the best explanations – these voices were not heard like those of the press and television reports from outside the city. It irritated me because Black people in Liverpool were treated as if our background, our identity, our presence was the same as Black people in London, Birmingham and Manchester. And I suspected that the same old stories, by the same old people, were about to irritate me again this July 2021, on the fortieth anniversary of the uprisings. So, I wanted to get my story out there.

I knew Black people in Liverpool shared a lot in common with Black people in other cities, but I knew that there were many differences too. Differences because of how Liverpool first became ‘the slaving capital of the world’ and then became Great Britain’s second city of Empire. Because of how there are far more people in the community with African rather than

Caribbean backgrounds, far more families of mixed origins going back multiple decades, generations and even centuries. Far more of us confined largely to Liverpool 8. How Liverpool in general and Black people in particular experienced far worse economic conditions and more severe unemployment through the 1970s and 1980s than other cities.

I knew how our memory of transatlantic slavery and the trade in human beings in Liverpool itself differed from the memory of slavery held by Black people in other cities in England – where they were more likely to know and think about slavery in the Caribbean. And I knew how Black people in Liverpool – for far longer than most Black people in other cities – have refused to passively accept these conditions. How we have never stopped campaigning against racism, discrimination and injustice. Never stopped challenging the distorted and biased history told in schools. And I knew how Black women have always been at the foreground of these protests, sometimes as leaders, frequently the majority in Black and multi-racial organisations. Just as they are today, in 2021.

I’m not saying that Liverpool is totally different from the rest of Britain. Both differences and similarities are important, but I think it’s the differences that matter more. Why? Because they mean that Liverpool and Black people in Liverpool can’t be treated in the same way as other cities. The solutions offered in other cities

won't work in Liverpool. In 1981, we weren't immigrants that had just arrived, so we didn't need help with assimilation. We weren't new to the city, or the country, so we didn't need to figure out our way around. English was always our first language, so we don't need to be taught English. When we made phone calls for jobs or housing, with our Scouse accents, we weren't immediately turned away. That only happened when we turned up at employers or housing, and they saw our Black faces. We weren't refugees, so we didn't need to be put on a path to citizenship. Institutional racism, compounded by class inequality and sexism, were the real reasons for our distress, just as they had always been, and despite the consistent denial in the city.

As I sat down to write these concluding thoughts, I wondered what kind of message I should communicate. Should I tell the truth, as I see it, whether it dampens the spirits or not? Should I tell an inspirational story of resistance and resilience? Should I put a positive spin on things and keep hope alive? You know, like politicians. Should I highlight how the glass is half full? Or half empty? Decisions, decisions, decisions.

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It's not so easy to write a conclusion to the legacy of the Liverpool 8 uprisings – or the legacy of uprising across the nation. Because the story is not over. Because even in 2021, we're still living the legacy of the uprisings. We're still living the legacy of slavery and imperialism. The terrifying experiences of Grenfell, the wicked and unforgivable treatment of the Windrush Generation and their children, the emergence and fallout from Brexit, the inspiring initiatives of Black Lives Matter and the backlash from the Conservative government have reminded us of that. As do the horrific murders of young Black people on Liverpool city streets. Seems like money and action were no problem when it came to protecting statues of one of Britain's biggest imperialists, Winston Churchill. But they didn't spend so much or move so fast to compensate the Windrush Generation. Not that we needed to be reminded, because we already knew.

What happened in the Liverpool 8 uprisings in 1981 is a reflection of all this. Black people in Liverpool have been telling this truth for decades, for generations and

even for centuries. But most people outside Liverpool 8 got the story back to front. They said we only wanted to live in Liverpool 8, but we say they put us here and won't let us out. They said we didn't want to study or work, but we said that their education was colonising our minds. They told us we didn't want to work, but in fact they rejected us whenever we applied for jobs. They said we wouldn't cooperate with the police, but we said the police were racist from the very start. They said there was racial harmony in the city, but we said whatever harmony existed could only be found in Liverpool 8. They said we don't like white people, but we said many of our families and friends are white people. They said we had a chip on our shoulder, but we said it's not a chip on our shoulder but your foot on our neck. They called what happened, riots but we called them uprisings. They said they were random and chaotic, but we say they were focused. On and on it went. But they have the resources to push their story and we don't.

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The uprisings in 1981 have clearly had some impact. Many things have changed since then, and some of them because of the uprisings. But many things remain the same, despite the uprisings. I described both of them in the last article. The pace of change has even picked up following the killing of George Floyd in the United States in 2020, and the emergence of a Black Lives Matter movement. But COVID-19 and the lockdown have slowed things down too.

As I struggled to write a conclusion about the Liverpool 8 uprisings and their legacy, I turned to Dave Clay's book again, just as I did to evaluate the situation in 2021. He reminded us of what life was like for him as a kid and put our current woes in context:

"During my school days, the role of Liverpool in the slave trade was not on the curriculum. In those days, they depicted African people as 'savages' who boiled White people in big pots – unless Tarzan saved them – and danced around with spears. Our fathers were African, our community and families were African, our skin was Black. Our reality was different than our White school friends... It soon became clear that our history was 'hidden' or misrepresented. From my recollections, museums depicted Africa the same way as our school books. By the 1960s, we were demanding Black studies and the removal of racist literature from our schools. Most demands were denied. The era of self-help would see the rise of local Black organisations that addressed the issues of racial discrimination."

You know what, that's exactly how I remember it too. And it reminds me of the song by Fela Kuti we used to listen to in the Sierra Leone nightclub – 'Teacher Don't Teach me Nonsense'.

As we go forward beyond 2021, I see two sets of overlapping issues as priorities – achieving racial equality and decolonising our minds. We are not on a fast track to achieving racial equality in housing, jobs, health or educational access and resources. The historical achievements of Black women in politics must be applauded, yes, but I believe each of them will surely tell you they won't be happy until we at least have similar firsts in business, banking and universities, and in medicine, architecture and law. And beyond firsts too. Which again, is back to resources.

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But I do believe we are on a steady, unrelenting and uncompromising track to decolonising our minds. In terms of Black Liverpool, our history and our present, we have more information that is more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive than what Dave and I had when we were children. Black children

today don't have to rely only on the nonsense in Liverpool schools – and they're still teaching a lot of nonsense. They can find better information and more accurate, comprehensive and inclusive facts elsewhere than in schools – about Black Liverpool, Black Britain – and across Africa and the diaspora. They just have to look. The very fact that these articles are appearing on the website of Writing on the Wall is a case in point. We still don't have as much as we deserve, but it's far better than what we had in 1981. Young people today may think we're not moving fast enough, but again compared to 1981, we're moving at light speed now. Well, not light speed, but at least the speed of sound.

And we are on track to telling a more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive story about what happened in 1981. Jimi Jagne is a community activist, born and raised in Liverpool 8, who experienced the abuse of police officers as a child and teen first-hand many times before 1981 arrived. He was involved in the protests in 1981 and was arrested during the protests. Since then, he's carried out research, attended commemorative conferences and given public presentations about what really happened. He developed insights and self-awareness from the writings of Black Americans, he expanded his knowledge by reading up on British slavery, he discovered the facts about Liverpool and West Africa during imperialism and he was inspired by Rastafari and Reggae music. He continues to work tirelessly to challenge the predominant and misleading narratives that can still be found across British media. Right now, in 2021, he is reaching out to others who were involved in a similar defence of Black communities across the nation in 1981 – in Brixton, St. Pauls and Handsworth, in Longsight, Moss Side and Chapeltown. Jimi believes that anyone in favour of telling the truth still has the chance to seize the moment. And he knows that if we don't tell the full story about what really happened, then others will tell it for us. That's why he continues in his quest. And we should wish him every success.



Let me end with my own personal opinion about 1981 and about Black Liverpool more generally. I can sum it up in one question. Do Black people in Liverpool – and our families and friends – have all the resources we need to overcome the problems that still confront us? The answer is surely no. But we persevere. We'll continue pushing for racial equality and we'll continue working to decolonise our minds.

And if you're reading this, it doesn't really matter whether you agree or disagree with what I've written. As long as I get you to think about the issues. That's my main goal. And whether the glass is half full or half empty, I leave it to everyone to decide for themselves. Because you all have your own opinions too.

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 M.S.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).