

BLACK LIVERPOOL'S' UNIQUE ASSEMBLAGE OF FEATURES AT THE START OF THE 1970S



This series is dedicated to Dr. Ray Costello, the foremost historian of Black Liverpool

"An anomaly is a departure or exception to what is considered typical. In terms of its economic history, as well as the British Empire and race relations, Liverpool was a departure from what's typical of other cities; and the Black community in Liverpool at the start of the 1970s was a departure from what was typical of Black communities in other cities at that time"

Professor Stephen Small

At the start of the 1970s, there were two sets of factors in Liverpool that distinguished our Black community in significant ways from Black communities in other cities. This assemblage of features – what I call a “racialised anomaly” – arose from the unique history of the city. These factors directly shaped the arrival, embrace and transformation of transnational Black culture from West Africa, the West Indies and the United States.

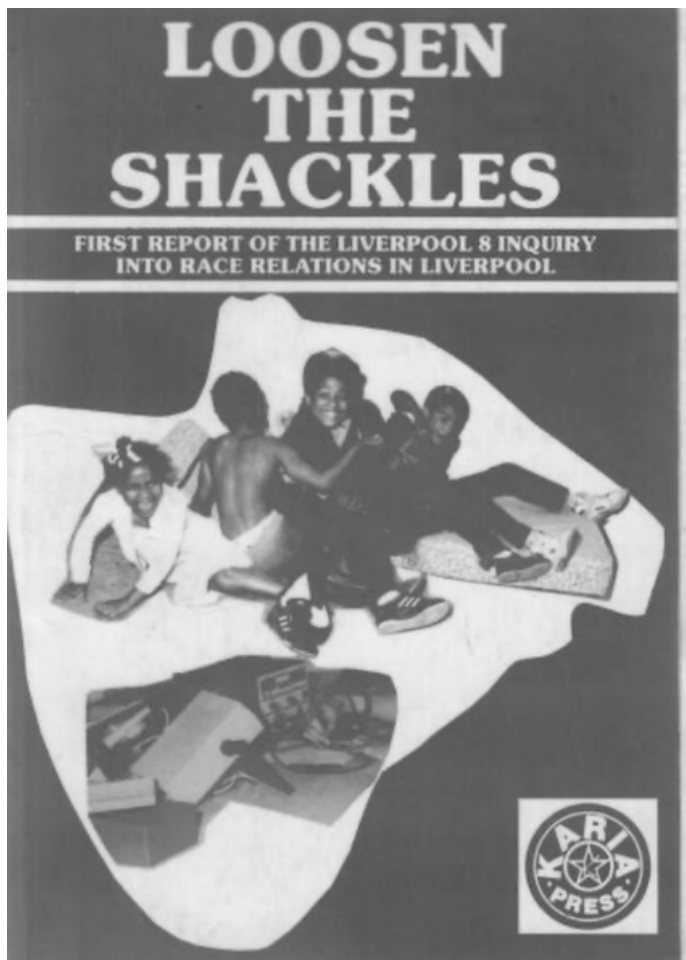
INEQUALITY AND SEGREGATION

The first set of factors at the start of the 1970s included economic obstacles, entrenched racial inequality and housing segregation. Black people faced much higher rates of unemployment, and were confined to lower-skilled and low-waged jobs than white people. We had less success in schools and higher education, and fewer qualifications. We had limited access to training programs and fewer professional or trade skills. And when we succeeded, we still faced higher levels of inequality and unemployment than our white peers.

Institutional racism, and persistent racial discrimination were the main reasons for these experiences and outcomes. Yes, white people faced similar problems but not as many, or as intensely, as us.

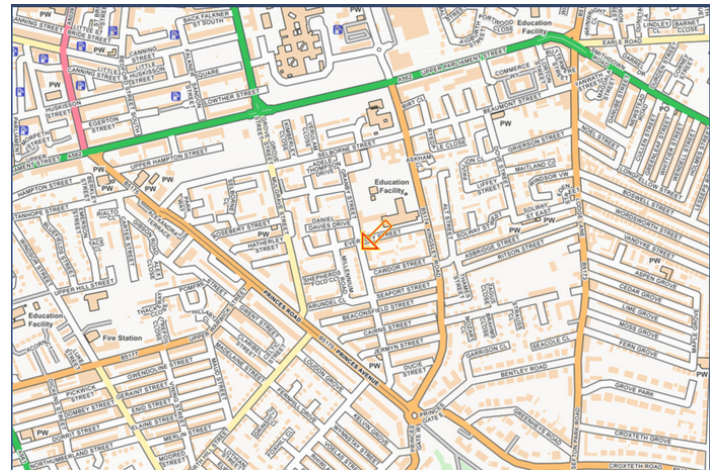
For example, in Liverpool at this time there were very few Black nurses or schoolteachers (and it wasn't until 1999, that we got our first Black head schoolteacher, Gloria Hyatt). Few office workers were employed in the financial district or in the offices of the Royal Liver Building, the Cunard Building or the Port of Liverpool Building at the Pier Head. There were no university lecturers, and only a small number of social workers. By the 1980s, the city council employed only a handful of Black people across its entire workforce of around 30,000 employees. There were no MPs and no diplomats. We did not get our first Black city councillor until Liz Drysdale was elected for Labour in the Granby Ward in 1987. Black people visiting from other cities asked why there were no Black faces in city centre shops, banks, building societies and post offices, and why so few Black players in Liverpool and Everton football teams, especially as Black players in the 1970s could be found in London other cities around the nation.

Black communities in other cities faced comparable problems of inequality and discrimination compared to white people, but not to the same extent or with the same intensity as in L8, especially in light of the fact we've been here for multiple generations while the majority of Black communities in other cities had been resident only since the 1940s. It's because of this unique combination of factors that the Black community was described by the Gifford Report in 1989 as suffering from 'uniquely horrific racism'



Loosen The Shackles

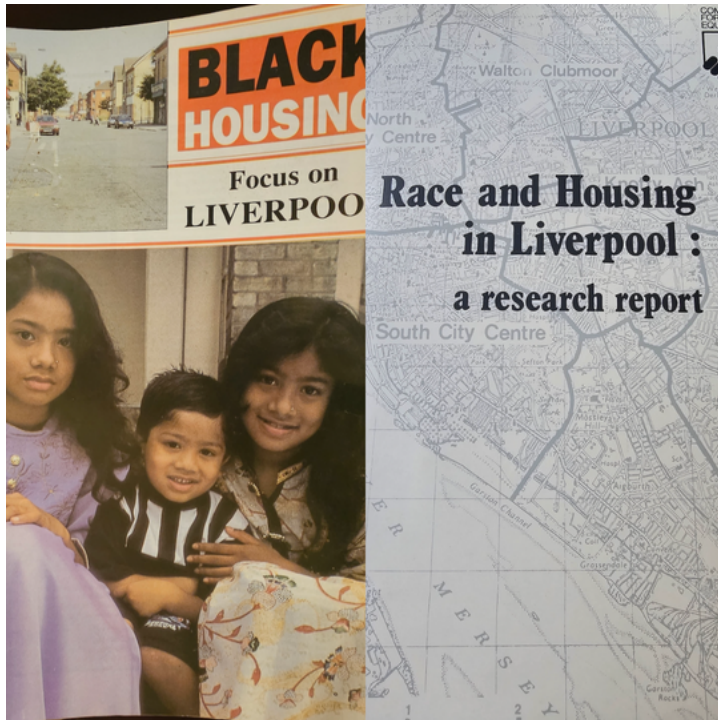
This first set of factors also included housing concentration, as the vast majority of Black families at the start of the 1970s lived in Liverpool 8, (known locally at L8) often called the Granby Triangle, and known outside the city as "Toxteth" since the uprisings in 1981. This concentration – which can rightly be called "segregation" – was largely the result of historical and ongoing racist discrimination, plain and simple. Public and private housing providers discriminated against Black families – in policy and practice, – and kept us confined to inferior housing stock. This happened first in Liverpool 1, through the 1950s, and then in L8 from the 1950s. We all knew it from personal and family experiences, from independent academic research, and from investigations by foundations and non-profit organisations. Reports on housing by the Commission for Racial Equality in the 1970s, and the Federation of Black Housing Organisations in the 1990s documented the pattern of inequality.



The Granby Triangle

And a report compiled by Liverpool Black Caucus in the mid-1980s reported that if Black people tried to live outside L8, even in districts adjacent to L8, we faced vandalism, abuse and even violence from neighbours or gangs of youths. Black and mixed kids in schools faced constant taunting and racial abuse. And in families with a white mother and a Black father, the racist N-word was often written on doorsteps. This hateful bile was spewed on my family's doorsteps about my own mother when our family moved to Liverpool 17 in the 1960s, just a few miles outside L8. Racist whites in areas adjacent to L8 could not bear it when even minimal effort was made to provide some reasonable accommodation for families from L8 with the creation of the Falkner housing estate in L8 in 1972.

Many residents called L8 a ghetto to highlight how it was created by racism, and to reflect the similarities we saw in our community with ghettos in the United States. Some people even called it a "Bantustan" which were the segregated territories in South Africa – desperately lacking resources and facilities – set aside by the white Apartheid government to subjugate, control and demoralize South Africa's Black populations. No surprise that Black people that visited Liverpool often asked – why do all the Black people live in one district? Because this was not the case in London and so many other cities.



CRE race and housing report 1974 and Black Housing focus on Liverpool 1994

COMPOSITION OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

The second set of factors that made Liverpool different had to do with the composition and history of the Black community. This included the fact that **our community was mainly comprised of long-term citizens and residents, mostly Black and mixed families, with many families going back generations and longer, rather than being mainly recent post-war arrivals.** The community also involved high rates of inter-racial dating and marriage and a high proportion of people of mixed racial descent. Black Liverpool's most accomplished and distinguished historian, Dr. Ray Costello, published multiple books and articles that document the history of L1 and L8 families, including some families that date back to the 1700s.

Families of mixed origins mainly involved Black or mixed men with white girlfriends or wives. It seems that few Black or mixed women dated or married white men, until at least the 1990s, and even then the numbers remained small. Mixed families involving West Indian men were certainly present, but their presence was generally overestimated given the public-

facing expressions of West Indian culture from the 1970s, in the form of reggae music and Rastafarian cultural practices (like the widespread use of red, gold and green colours, men growing dreadlocks, and women wearing headwraps, especially among younger generations).

How many Black people lived in Liverpool from the start of the 1970s? Not so easy to answer and I'm not convinced anyone knows for sure. We have statistics, we have guesses and we have confusing categories. For example, the category "Black" sometimes included Chinese, Arabs and Asians, and sometimes it did not. In 1977 the Black population in Liverpool (meaning "Black British", West Indians and Africans) was estimated at between 11,000 and 15,000. In 1981 the same Black population was estimated as between 12,400 and 18,000 people. The 1991 census put the same Black population at around 7,200, though I doubt anyone in the L8 community found this tiny number believable. The 2001 census calculated around 13,300 Black people with a large majority being of mixed origins. In none of these estimates does the Black population amount to more than 2-3 per cent of the city population. The city's population was around 452,000 in 1991, and 440,000 in 2001 (although the metropolitan area population was much larger).

Another significant aspects of our community compared to other cities, was that most Africans in Liverpool in the 1970s were working class - with few exceptions, like African students that arrived from the 1960s. In other cities, especially London, many - often most - Africans at the start of the 1970s were middle class, often university students or professionals. There were more men than women and if married, they were typically married to African or Black women, and many of them had a wife back home in their country of origin (whether Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya or South Africa). And unlike Liverpool, many - possibly most - of them were recent arrivals, with the expressed intention of returning to their country of origin (even if far fewer returned than had intended to do so).

COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

There were other differences too in regard to community knowledge, collective sentiments and beliefs. First, for example, **our community memory of slavery - especially the pivotal role Liverpool played in the brutality, violence, and economic exploitation of Africa - was far more vivid than in other cities. We also had more firsthand information about Liverpool's role in imperialism in West Africa throughout the twentieth-century,** and how the city had such a significant African rather than West Indian population. We got little or no information like this from schools, press or politicians (they mainly celebrated shipping and the port). We got that information from other sources. Many people in the community had parents and grandparents who shared stories about the racism they had faced in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. We had so many Black and mixed families headed by African men working on ships involved in imperial trade - primarily the Elder Dempster Line - even as late as the 1960s. Those fathers - and other African male family members and visitors - shared these experiences, as did other Black community elders, many born in Liverpool and not working on ships. And we got information and inspiring stories of self-determination, resistance and resilience from Afro-America, not entirely the same as imperialism, but similar enough for us to see the parallels.

More generally, community elders who had studied history, and had lived experience - like Ludwig Hesse, Eric Lynch, Dorothy Kuya and Sandra Antigha - told us stories too and shared books and articles. They pointed to the images of African heads at the top of Liverpool Town Hall; and the words of praise and reverence on statues for politicians like William E Gladstone and William Huskisson, men who defended Liverpool slavery and imperialism. The fact that so many families in our community had African names - like Ankrah and Antigha, Jagne and Tagoe - was another clue. As were the Prinny Avenue nightclubs like the Ibo, Sierra Leone and Yoruba.



Frieze of African Woman's head Liverpool Town Hall



Christopher Columbus Statue at Sefton Park, Palm House

One more important feature of the Black community was that because such a large section of Liverpool-born Black people did not have parents that were recent settlers in Liverpool, they did not say things in the 1970s like "we are guests in this country". This includes families like the Quarless, Cole and Clarke families, each of whom can trace their origins back to the 1800s. And these families did not embrace the so-called myth of return – the idea that as immigrants they were at some point going to "return" (permanently) to their country of origin in the West Indies or West Africa someday. This was about as far from their minds as it was from the minds of white people and others born and raised in the city, with families dating back generations (including those of Irish, Scandinavian, or Chinese ancestry and heritage). Moreover, no one felt that the economic hardship, inequality and disadvantage that we faced was the result of recent arrival in the country and the need to go through a process of assimilation (or integration) into the English language, political systems, or acquiring other cultural knowledge and practices. We knew it was primarily because of racism.

Black people in London (and other cities) clearly had first-hand experience and memory of slavery and imperialism in the West Indies. However, they were far less likely to have information or collective memory of the role that each British city in which they lived had played in this history. That was mainly because they had not been present in these cities long enough to develop a collective memory, especially not over generations; and because the information about the role each city had played was not as readily available or known at this time as it was in Liverpool.



International Garden Festival, 1984

CHANGES FRM 1970'S TO EARLY 200'S

I began this article by describing circumstances at the start of the 1970s, but what did conditions look like by the start of 2000s? It clear that some things remained the same, and some things changed. To begin with, **the living circumstances that we faced in L8 (economic inequality, unemployment, housing segregation, police surveillance) did not change significantly by the start of the 2000s.** For example, there was no significant improvement in economics or employment opportunities for Black people. Not from the creation and opening of the International Garden Festival in 1984, not from development of the Albert Dock area when it opened in 1988, not from the massive growth in student enrollments in the 1990s, and not from the transformation of tourism that led to Liverpool being renamed 'Maritime City'.



Maritime Mercantile City



Albert Dock

The Charles Wootton college had closed, all the Prinny Avenue nightclubs had gone, as had a number of Black organisations. Most Black and mixed families still lived in L8, although a tiny handful of families moved out of L8, mainly to areas adjacent to L8 (like Smithdown Road, Wavertree and further afield to Allerton). And a tiny Black community, mainly of recently arrived settlers, had begun to develop outside L8, in the Kensington area.

But information, knowledge and insights into Africa and the African diaspora had improved significantly by the end of the 1990s. Far more accurate, inclusive and comprehensive information became available, from media, literature and visitors. More research and writing was carried out on Black Liverpool, including Liverpool-born Black people (and others), most notably Dr. Ray Costello, Dr. Mark Christian, Dr. William Ackah and Dr. Diane Frost. Far more courses on Black history developed. Before it was closed down, Charles Wootton College played a major role in these developments, as did Source Books. Liverpool Anti-Racist Community Arts Association (LARCAA) had continually organized multiple events and brought insights in from across the diaspora. The Transatlantic Slavery Gallery provided more detailed information than ever before, as well as lectures, performers and community spaces.

Overall, the gross misrepresentations of Africa widespread in Liverpool press and among politicians began to decrease. Several mainstream institutions in the city – like museums, press and some politicians – began to reluctantly acknowledge the horrors of slavery and imperialism and to recognize the humanity of the enslaved, and their agency and resistance. And institutions like the city council education department and libraries organised some events and exhibitions, and began to provide resources directly about Black people and for Black people. It was far more than we ever had at the start of the 1970s even though it was still far less than we needed or deserved. In all of this, as usual, Black people in L8 were at the vanguard of the encouragement, protest, campaigns and creativity that led to these changes.

**“Come with me yes I'll be your
guide
to the city where I reside
Let's take a walk
So we can talk
about Liverpool on Merseyside
Now check out Toxteth my
dwelling place
Can you believe your eyes.”**

Dr Levi Tafari



LARCAA Poster – 1996

AUTHOR PROFILE

Stephen Small, PhD, is a Professor of the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, a role he began in January 2025 after he retired from teaching. Prior to that he taught in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies since 1995. He was Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (June 2020 to January 2025). He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe. As a professor he researched the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. Since retirement he mainly works on legacies of British imperialism, with a particular focus on Liverpool. 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).

His most recent book is ***In the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana***, 2023. Before that he published ***20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe***, January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: **Black Liverpool "The real thing". West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the 20th century**, and will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2026.

Stephen was born and raised in Liverpool 8, in 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 Transatlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum which opened in 1994 (and which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).

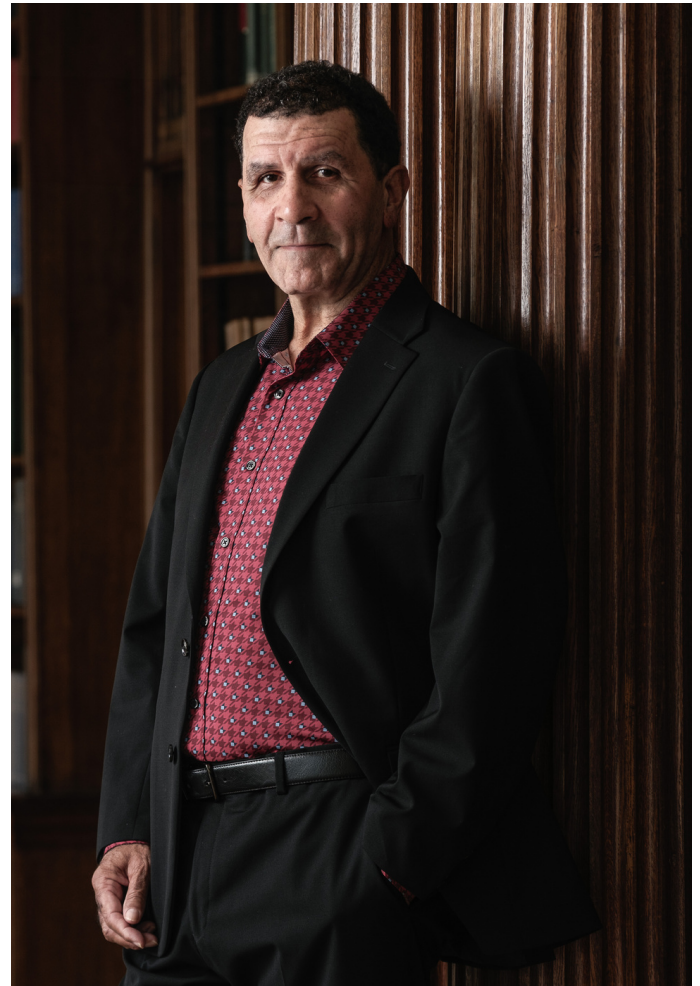


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