CONCLUSION: THE HIGH TIDE OF BLACK AWAKENING IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

WOW WRITING ON THE WALL

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

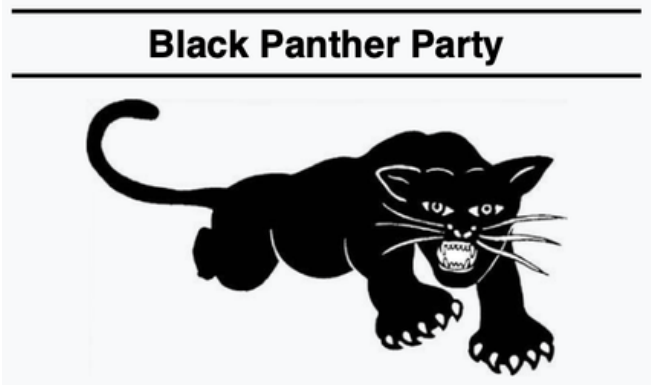
'We achieved a lot back then and some of the things that are being done today (in the 2020s), like decolonising the curriculum, we were doing those things in the '80s and '90s. We had pioneering spaces like the Charles Wootton College - a Black college at the height of Thatcherism. We don't even have a Black college now' - *Dr. William Ackah, former lecturer at the Charles Wootton College*

This is the final article in this Smalltalk series. Each series is comprised of eight articles (in recognition of Liverpool 8 where the majority of the Black community lives), plus an introduction. Like the previous two series (one on the uprisings in 1981, and one on imperial Liverpool and West Africa) the articles share important insights on Black Liverpool and the Black community in Liverpool. The information in this current series is drawn from my forthcoming book - **Black Liverpool. "the real thing". West African, West Indian and Afro-American culture at the end of the twentieth-century** - which will be published by Liverpool University Press in summer 2026.

Flag of Ethiopia 1897-1974 and 1974 onwards

My book tells the story of the arrival, embrace and transformation of multiple waves of transnational Black culture from Africa and the diaspora from the 1970s to the early 2000s.

Black women's experiences in the city are central to all aspects of the book. The flags posted in this article list some of the nations from which the L8 community drew influence.



Black Panther Party Flag

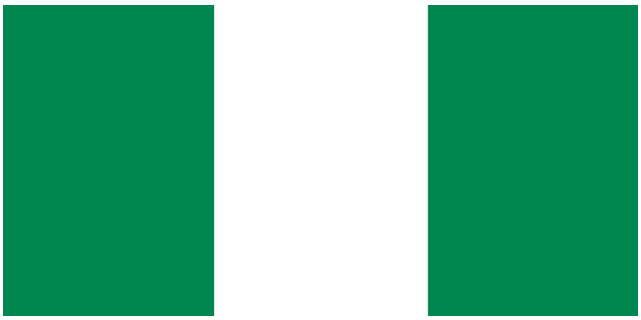
The multiple waves of culture that I describe include music, nightlife and performance; film and literature, Black leaders, politicians and nationalist ideologies; Black history courses, language and dialect, fashion and style. These waves of culture were spread across the Black community via television, film, press and radio; some were brought first-hand by individuals and families from across Africa and the diaspora who visited or settled in the city; and others arrived when L8 residents travelled internationally and returned home. As these decades unfolded, Afro-American culture remained predominant, West Indian culture was in rapid ascendancy, while patterns from across Africa, especially West Africa and South Africa, became increasingly prominent. Many of these currents were mixed with one another, and with currents of scouse and British cultural practices too.

What I've shared in these articles can be described as a tidal wave of transnational Black culture in this period, but not one that overwhelmed us, rather one that enriched our lives. Of course, these cultural patterns could also be found in all major cities in England in this period where Black communities embraced them too, and we all shared many common legacies of slavery and imperialism.

SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

WOW WRITING ON THE WALL

On first impressions, the Black experience in Liverpool may seem the same as in other cities. We faced racism and inequality, high levels of unemployment, a colonial education system, inferior housing, poor health and police surveillance. Black women were adversely affected by the combined effects of racism and sexism. Like Black communities in other cities the L8 community refused to be silent or motionless in the face of these obstacles - we organised protests, took part in campaigns and set up community groups, often with Black women at the forefront or in the majority. Black women also set up groups and organisations to achieve their own priorities. And just like other cities we developed cultural practices from across Africa and the diaspora too. But the truth is that first impressions are misleading. **There were many crucial aspects of the Black Liverpool experience that were unique to the city, that were not always obvious and that had important consequences.**



Flag of Nigeria

This included differences in the history of the city, in the composition of the Black community and in the many ways in which diasporic culture was embraced and transformed. For example, Liverpool rose to become the "slaving capital of the world" (1600s-1830s) and when slavery was legally abolished the city became the "second city of empire". During imperialism (1830s-1950s) Liverpool was involved in far more import and export trade with West Africa than was any other city in England, including London. As a result of this trade far more Africans than West Indians arrived and settled in Liverpool. And because they were mainly men, they developed romantic relationships and marriages with local white women and their children of mixed origins became a large part of the Black community.

By the 1970s Liverpool revealed a unique assemblage of features compared to other cities. Our community was comprised mainly of families of African and mixed origins, rather than mainly West Indian; it included multi-generational residents, some families present over centuries, rather than mainly settlers since the 1940s (the so-called Windrush Generation).

Flag of Sierra Leone

Members of the community with immediate African (rather than West Indian) origins were mainly working class. Our community had a higher proportion of interracial dating and marriage, and a higher proportion of people of mixed racial origins than Black communities in other cities. Many Black families included white family members - mothers, brothers, sisters, cousins and the Black community was segregated into one single district - Liverpool 8 (aka Toxteth). The community possessed a multi-generational knowledge of slavery and first-hand experience of imperialism, and Liverpool's role in both, passed down by community elders, visitors and organisations.

What this unique assemblage of features meant is that when waves of Black culture arrived from across Africa and the diaspora, they were received, embraced and transformed in ways that were distinctive from patterns in other cities. For example, many cultural patterns came from Afro-America and one of the unique features of Liverpool was the music and style of the Timepiece nightclub, a venue that was the embodiment of Afro-America and that symbolised the self-assurance, confidence and pride of Afro Americans.

Another key feature was the presence of hundreds of Afro-American military men who frequently came to the city from US military bases in England, some of whom dated and married local Black and mixed women. Given the concentration of Black families in L8, almost everyone in the community had a family member or close female friend that married an Afro-American man and relocated to the United States. Further unique features could be found in the Afro-American history and role models taught in organisations like the Charles Wootton College, LARCAA and in the greater emphasis put of foregrounding Black women in this history in organisations like Liverpool Black Sisters. Another unique feature was the group named the Green Jackets, the Liverpool-based version of the US Black Panther Party.

Many cultural patterns came from the West Indies spearheaded by reggae music, Rastafari, carnival and calypso. A unique feature in Liverpool was the impressive cluster of Prinny Avenue African nightclubs where reggae and soul music was played. This was joined by the reggae sound system organisers and DJs that emerged, with many of them from mixed African and white families. Immersion in a more authentic Jamaican and West Indian culture than that which existed in Liverpool was achieved by multiple visits by L8 residents to other cities with larger West Indian communities. These experiences sometimes resulted in colour differences among Liverpool-born Blacks being commented on, occasionally leading to antagonism or conflict.

Flag of Ghana

And many cultural patterns also came from West Africa building on the African presence and culture that was already present in the city.

Flag of Gambia

This included the long-established African families, the preponderance of African nightclubs, Africa food, visitors from Africa, and the limited but noticeable African music. They were joined by the emergence of public African-focused activities and organisations including African Liberation Day, the Steve Biko Housing Association, the Delado African Drum and Dance company and Amadudu women's refuge. Many of the existing L8 community organisations also devoted more time to African culture and identity, again with Black women prioritising the role of women and girls in African societies.

Once again, some of what happened in Liverpool also happened in London and other cities, but not to the same extent, not with the same intensity, not in a context where Black families were so segregated into one area, and not with the long vicious history that we experienced. The composition of Black communities in London and other cities also shared much in common with Liverpool's Black community, but again, not with populations that had been resident for generations and longer, not with the same high proportion of African and mixed African-white families, not with the same high proportion of people of mixed origins, not with the same steady arrival of seamen from West Africa, not in a community so packed into one neighbourhood, and once again not with the same long history. Afro-Americans wouldn't be satisfied with a story of Black America based only on the history of New York so why should we accept the story of Black Britain based only on the history of Black London?

It's because of these palpable differences that we refuse to accept a history and narrative of Black Britain dominated by London and the West Indian experience.

Flag of South Africa

In fact, a more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive history of Black Britain needs to take account of the unique experiences of all major cities, as well as smaller towns and rural areas. Because even though cities like Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds shared much in common with London they still reveal unique trajectories, community composition and community experiences. For example, the ways in which British imperialism led to far more warehouses in Manchester, canals in Birmingham and textile mills in Leeds should be considered. As should the patterns of settlement of varied communities from across the West Indies in Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds. Stories from these cities are intrinsically interesting, they help us document the variety and vitality of Black life across the nation, and they need to be told. These stories will give us a far more complete account of Black Britain.

In other words, the story in my book brings out the who, what, when, where and why of transnational culture and community transformation.

Flag of Jamaica

It shares insights into the defiant spirit of the L8 community in the face of the indifference, inaction and even hostility of city authorities and many private institutions; and it reveals our initiative, creativity, drive and perseverance. The story is drawn from more than seventy original interviews with L8 residents, workers, activists and celebrities that lived through this period; as well as multiple interviews with others from L8 obtained from television, radio and social media. And it's a story based on rich factual information produced by community groups and organisations and shared in a wide array of leaflets, pamphlets, drawings, and other documents. This first-hand information is simply not available in books. The L8 community made history – expansive and inclusive history – and this history has not yet been told in its fullness. I don't want this history to be lost, and I know people in L8 don't want this history to be lost.

Flag of Trinidad and Tobago

Most people today don't know this history, and if I did not tell this history many people today would never know, and future generations would be none the wiser.

I don't pretend that this is a complete history, but it's my contribution to making sure a more complete history is told. And I'm optimistic that it will be told because plentiful information about this period still exists in personal and organisational documents that have yet to be mined. And even more plentiful information can still be tapped from the people that lived through these experiences and are still alive today to tell the tale. I hope these articles and the forthcoming book with motivate people to access that information and to make this story more complete. **This is our legacy and we must not let this legacy be lost.**

Flag of Barbados

Let me end with one final point. The information in these articles – and in my book – does not go beyond the early 2000s. I finished at this date because that's when economic improvements associated with maritime city tourism, and a dramatic increase in the number of students in the city happened. And it's when the settlement in the city of a far wider range of Africans than ever before also happened.

My book is not the place to tell that story and there are other people far better able than me, and in a far better position than me, to tell this more recent history. People reading these articles from the vantage point of the 2025 and beyond – especially people in Liverpool 8 – can look back over what has happened since the early 2000s and come to their own conclusions. But I believe any evaluation of the last twenty-five years must begin with recognition of just how backward city authorities and private institutions were at the start of the 1970s, and how much progress the L8 community made between the 1970s and the start of the 2000s.

The construction of the Windrush as a national, symbolic event has tended to obscure the extent to which the perspectives of already settled Black communities were regionally significant. Windrush narratives tend to relegate the earlier part of the twentieth century to the shelf of curiosity studies – *Barnor Hesse*

Clockwise from top left: Flags of Dominica, Grenada, St Vincent and The Grenadines and St Lucia

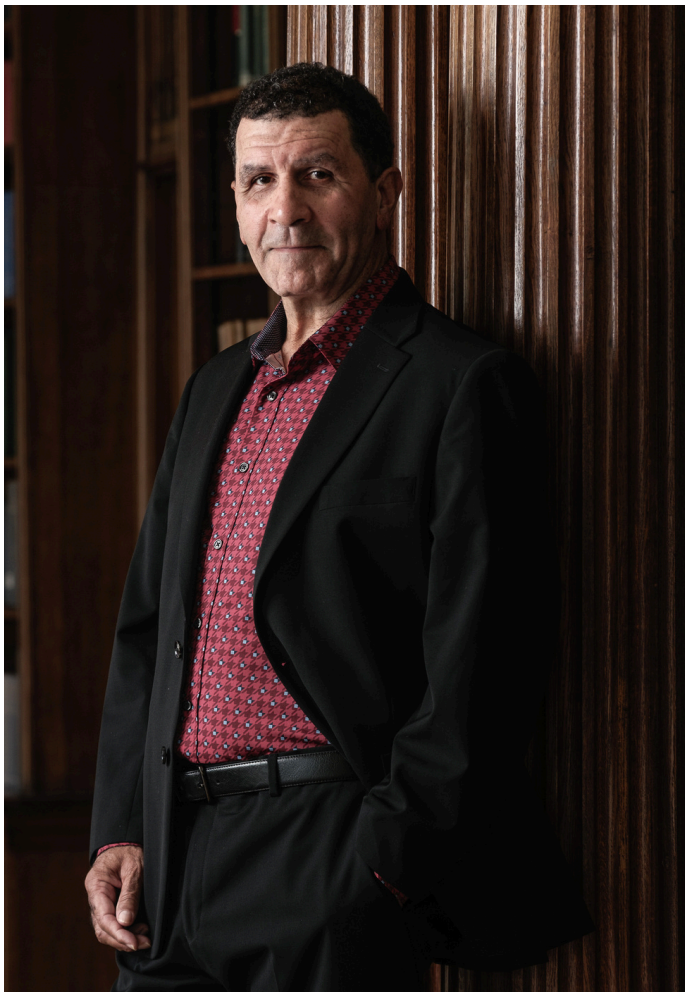
SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

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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