SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL
HISTORY OF BLACK LIVERPOOL

WOW WRITING ON THE WALL

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

"Liverpool has always been proud of its past, and particularly its history and traditions as a port with shipping links to many parts of the world. Unfortunately, a conspiracy of silence has buried a vital part of this past. There is a hidden history, which lies beneath the version of local history usually presented - the history of racism and Liverpool and the local black community is one that the city has tried to forget."

Wally Brown

In this article I highlight seven major features of Black Liverpool's history that led to its unique features at the start of the 1970s, and that bring to light just how much the Black community in Liverpool at that time stood in contrast to Black communities in other British cities. These patterns began during the long brutal period of Liverpool transatlantic slave trade and slavery (from around 1700 to the 1830s) and continued during the long vicious period of imperial Liverpool (from the 1830s to African and Caribbean independence in the 1950s and 1960s). And I follow this history up to the start of the 1970s, which is where my analysis of transnational Black culture in Liverpool really begins. **My main argument is that while most specialists of Black Liverpool highlight slavery as the city's most important legacy, I insist that we need to pay just as much attention to Liverpool's imperial period (from the 1830s).**

LIVERPOOL IMPERIAL TRADE WITH WEST AFRICA

First, is Liverpool's imperial trade with West Africa after slavery was abolished, which made Liverpool 'the second city of empire' (after London). Liverpool did more trade with West Africa than any other city in Britain did, and by the year 1900 it controlled up to 90% of this trade. Liverpool merchants exported salt, metalware, tobacco, firearms, gunpowder and alcohol to West Africa; and they imported gold, rubber, ivory, cocoa, ground nuts, palm oil and palm kernels from West Africa. Palm oil was used extensively as a lubricant in industry and railroads, and palm kernels were used for soap, candles and margarine. Each one was indispensable to the success of the second industrial revolution in England, and Merseyside was the single biggest producer of both. By 1854 trade in palm oil had become the most valuable single item traded from West Africa to Britain. In other words, **Liverpool replaced their trade in African bodies during slavery, with trade in African goods during imperialism produced by subordinated African labour.**

Liverpool as second city of empire

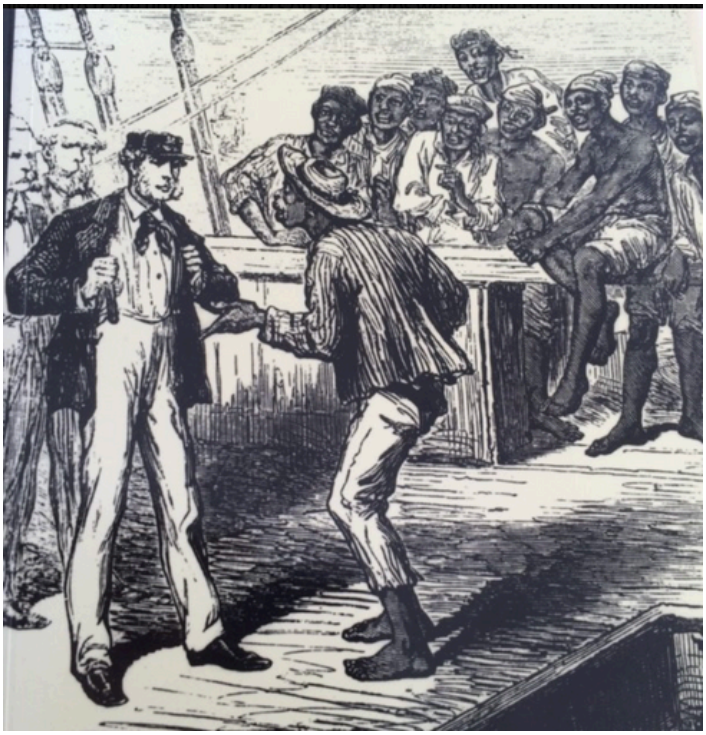
Some of the world's most profitable shipping lines emerged in Liverpool in the imperial period – Cammell-Lairds, Elder-Dempster, Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line and Samuel Cunard's luxury liners. Several of them did trade with West Africa. By 1914, the port was second only to London for international trade, with one third of all British exports and one quarter of all imports going through Liverpool. By the end of the 1800s, Liverpool had more millionaires than any other city in England besides London. Just as during slavery, it was white men during imperialism that owned and managed banking, businesses, ships and products, white male politicians that led the army and navy, and set the rules of the game. These achievements for white men were all based directly on how they fastened themselves strongly to racists beliefs, and carried out widespread racist practices.

BLACK 'SUBJECTS', CITIZENS AND LONG-TERM RESIDENTS

Second, the economic dynamics of Liverpool slavery had forced Africans into the West Indies and enslaved them, while keeping Africans arriving in England to a minimum. In contrast, the economic dynamics of Liverpool imperialism brought far more West Africans to Liverpool than ever before, (with probably more than 95% of them men). These men were mainly working class or from poor backgrounds. The biggest group was sailors on ships built by Cammell Laird and operated by the Elder Dempster Company, including small numbers of Somalis, again mainly men. The African men from British colonies in (what became) Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia and Sierra Leone were all British subjects and then citizens. Obviously, Black people born in Liverpool were citizens at birth. But neither group was treated like white men who were British citizens. They did the worse jobs on ships, were paid less, and were often sacked and discarded when they reached Liverpool. Any one of them, including Black people born in Liverpool could be deported in a split second, especially when unemployment was bad. And many of them actually were deported.

We don't know exactly how many Black people were resident in Liverpool during this long imperial period – census numbers and estimates exist but many are disputed.The census announced a Black population in Liverpool in 1911 at 3,000 people; by 1919 this group had risen to around 5,000, and it seemed to have remained around that level until the 1940s, and by 1948 had risen to an estimated 8,000 people. In the 1950s, Donald Manley (the brother of Michael Manley who became prime minister of Jamaica in the 1970s) completed research for his PhD at the University of Liverpool.

He did not estimate the size of the Black population overall, but indicated that there were more African immigrants than West Indian immigrants, and a large number of Liverpool-born Blacks. By 1963 the so-called 'colored population' of Liverpool was approximately 10,000. At no time did the Black population amount to more than a tiny fraction of Liverpool's total population. And throughout this period, it seems that more of the 'black British' group traced their ancestry directly to Africa, (almost certainly West Africa), than to the West Indies.



West African seamen on strike

INTERRACIAL DATING, MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN OF MIXED ORIGINS

Third, most of the Black people that arrived in Liverpool, whether African or West Indian were men (though the proportion of West Indian women was far higher than the number of African women). With so few Black women in the city, Black men began relationships with local white women whom they met in workplaces, pubs and social venues. And itwasn't just because of the gender imbalance, because most Black men, including those of mixed origins, typically preferred to date and marry white women than Black women. One reason is probably that in racist Britain, white women were put on a pedestal of desirability, while Black women were never represented in favorable ways, which is another example of a colonial education.

Working class white men verbally abused and often physically attacked Black men and white women walking together in public or socializing in pubs and clubs. White women with Black boyfriends were called prostitutes, and worse, often by members of their own families. Academics and power brokers in politics, businesses and churches condemned these relationships as "unnatural" and the declared the children were inferior, degenerate and confused. The most notorious accusations were published in two research reports validated by the University of Liverpool. In 1924 Rachel Fleming declared the children to be in a 'deplorable' state.

Muriel Fletcher declared that the men in these relationships were promiscuous, violent, diseased, and contemptuous of the white women they dated. And she alleged their "half-caste" children found it impossible to be absorbed into respectable society. These despicable views were later repeated publicly by many white people in Liverpool in the 1970s and 80s, especially by the Chief Constable of Merseyside, Kenneth Oxford. He called the Black community 'mongrels and half-castes' and alleged that we were the products of white prostitutes and transient African seamen.

Ekarte and mixed race kids

The population of mixed origins grew over time. In addition to the children of African men and white women, were children of West Indian men and white women, men of mixed origins and white women, as well as other mixtures (Black men and women of mixed origins, and two parents of mixed origins). The combinations were endless.
An unfortunate outcome of this process was the development in Liverpool 8 of terminology like 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste' and 'eighth caste' My main point it's a mistake to assume that most people of mixed origins Liverpool at the start of the 1970s had one Black parent and one white parent. Many of us simply did not have a white parent, but we just don't know how many.

UNEMPLOYMENT, INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

Fourth, after a prosperous start to the twentieth-century, (for many white people at least) the city experienced consistently poor economic conditions, high unemployment, inadequate housing conditions and significant poverty, especially as compared to other cities. By the 1930s, unemployment in Liverpool was typically 50% higher than the national average, and at the end of the 1940s, when the nation had a massive labour shortage (having lost hundreds of thousands of men - and many women - in the second world war) unemployment in Liverpool was still much higher than the national average. It became far worse in the decades that followed.

This resulted from the introduction of shipping containerization in the 1950s, the rise in international air travel, and increased trade with Europe which led to the movement of port activity from Liverpool to the east coast of Britain.

The city's over reliance on the port, and relatively limited manufacturing did not help. By the 1980s the unemployment rate, at 27 per cent, was around double the national average. One consequence of this was a declining city population. All city residents suffered, (except the rich, of course) and Black people suffered most. Unemployment among Black men and women was always two or three times higher than among whites. When they were employed, they were last hired and first fired; and frequently they were never even hired. The combined effects of racism and sexism meant that Black women were worse off than Black men and white women. All women were kept out of the top jobs in all sectors of employment, and Black women more so.

Racism in jobs was not just a working class matter – it also existed at the highest levels of the job hierarchy, in shipping, business and banking, higher education, and the medical profession. There's no evidence that Liverpool University, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine or Liverpool museums employed any Black people at senior levels. And no evidence they had more than a handful at junior level either.

One reason that Liverpool continued to have more Black people with immediate origins in Africa than the West Indies at the start of the 1970s is that when tens of thousands of men and women – the so-called Windrush Generation – began to arrive from the West Indies in the 1940s very few of them went to or stayed in Liverpool. They went to better opportunities in London, Birmingham and Manchester. Those that stayed in Liverpool faced discrimination in pay and working conditions, and struggled to find places to live.

RACIAL SEGREGATION IN HOUSING

Fifth, **Liverpool has always been a segregated city.** It began from the time the first Black people arrived, continued when others were born in the city, and intensified after the year 1900. From then until the 1940s Black and multiracial families were confined to Liverpool 1, next to the port in an area known as 'Sailor Town', and close to Pitt Street.

After this area suffered heavy bombing during World War II, we were moved up the hill and confined to Liverpool 8. African seamen on temporary stays in the city lived in segregated hostels. Racial discrimination was widespread in city hotels, in private housing, and in city council housing. L8 was characterised by poor housing, limited facilities and poor services. When Black people wandered outside either area we faced verbal abuse or physical violence. If we relocated out of the area, our houses were splattered with racist graffiti, and in schools our children were called racist names and told to go back to Africa. People in other neighbourhoods often called L8, a ghetto, although there were always far more white people living there than Black people (or another other racial or ethnic group).

RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Sixth, **Black people always resisted racism, but it would be a mistake to believe our lives over this period were filled with nothing but resistance. We lived our lives, pursued our hopes and dreams with whatever ways and means we could find.** We socialised with one another, found myriad ways to entertain and enjoy ourselves. We celebrated memorable family and community events, and pursued our faith and religious beliefs. There were always moments of happiness, joy, and camaraderie, and multiple inter-racial friendships with friends, colleagues and local people. Besides, so many of us had white people in our families ourselves. Just as we do today.

We also challenged racial injustice at every opportunity - for every act of oppression there was an act of resistance. And we did what we have always done - worked with family members and the community, created organisations and reached out to the African diaspora for support, ideas, and inspiration, for protection and reassurance, and to meet our needs. The history of self-determination, resistance and resilience in Black Liverpool is increasingly becoming uncovered, especially since the 1970s, with details about Black people born and raised in Liverpool, as well visitors.

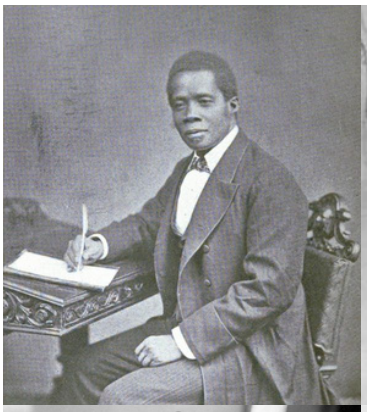
Black people from Liverpool (like John Archer) were at the Pan African Conference in London in 1900; some were involved in the League of Coloured People; still others attended the Fight Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945. One important organisation in L8 was The African Churches Mission (ACM) established by Pastor (George) Daniels Ekarte in 1931, at 122-124 Hill Street, after he arrived in Liverpool from Nigeria in 1915. The ACM provided social and economic support to the poor and needy, including many children of mixed parentage; and hosted many pan-Africanists. We knew almost nothing about Ekarte and the ACM, until Marika Sherwood published her book in 1994; the book was updated and republished in 2023. A gravestone and memorial service to honour him and recognize his work took place in August 2023.

Young Dorothy Kuya

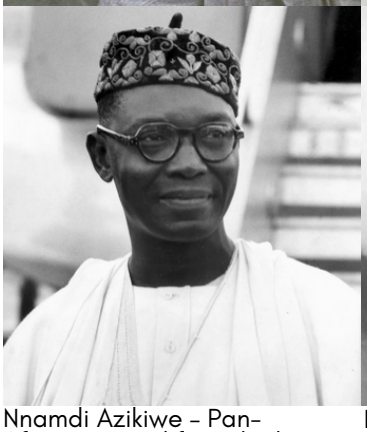
L8's most well-known campaigner for social justice throughout this period, Dorothy Kuya, born in 1933, was active in local organizations from the time she was a teenager, including the Communist Party. There were organisations based on nationality and ethnicity, like Nigeria and Sierra Leone, Jamaica and Trinidad. They contributed in a number of ways to local struggles and to independence struggles in the West Indies and West Africa. Then there was the Colonial People's Defence Association, The African Social and Technical Society, the Convention People's Party and the Merseyside West Indian Association.

Furthermore, just about every major pan-Africanist from across the world passed through Liverpool, over the first 50 years of the twentieth-century, spending days, weeks, months or longer in the city. That's because Liverpool was the main port for immigration and emigration including for Africans and other Black people travelling between Africa, Britain and the Americas.

Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Africanist, politician and anti-imperial educator



Amy Ashwood Garvey - Jamaican-born Pan-Africanist and cofounder of United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)



Nnamdi Azikiwe - Pan-Africanist, and first Black governor of Nigeria

Kwame Nkrumah - Pan-Africanist, first Prime Minister and then President of Ghana

Edward Wilmot Blyden, often called the father of Black nationalism, spent several months in Liverpool at the end of the nineteenth century. From the 1920s members of the West African Students Association (WASU) and later on the League of Coloured People (LCP) visited Liverpool, like Ladipo Solanke and Harold Moody. Black people in Liverpool formed a branch of the LCP and hosted the 12th Annual General Meeting in the city. In the 1930s, Marcus Garvey - and separately, Amy Ashwood Garvey - passed through Liverpool, as did Nnamdi Azikiwe (first President of Nigeria) and Kwame Nkrumah (first Prime Minister and President of Ghana). Prominent anti-colonialists George Padmore and Ras Makonnen were in contact with people in Liverpool and reached out to them during the Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945.

FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES OF IMPERIALISM AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF SLAVERY

Seventh, over the decades and generations, members of the Black community developed a vivid memory of trans-Atlantic slavery and its imperial legacies - especially legacies in Liverpool itself. We knew the names of families that got rich from slavery and imperialism; we saw the impressive port and harbour structures financed by slavery and imperialism; we knew about the streets named after men that got rich from slavery - like Ashton Street, Bold Street and Earle Road. We saw the carvings of Africans on city centre buildings like the Town Hall and at the Pier Head. And we saw statues of Christopher Columbus, Henry the Navigator and Charles Darwin at the Palm House in Sefton Park.

There was awareness in the Black community of Liverpool's imperial impact in West Africa too, an awareness that came from the steady stream of visitors to the city from Africa, and insights shared by community elders. African fathers that worked for Elder Dempster shipping company spent months abroad in Africa, and returned with music, food, and cultural and spiritual artifacts. They also shared stories about their home nations, and anti-colonial struggles for independence.Family members visited from Africa and Liverpool born-Blacks visited Africa too.

The names of prominent local families - like Ankrah, Amoo, Bassey and Brown, Cole, Osu, and Ogunburo - highlighted these connections. As did the larger than life - and louder than life - plethora of African nightclubs on Princes Avenue and adjacent roads - including The Sierra Leone, the Ibo Social Club, the Nigerian, the Ghana, the Yoruba and the Silver Sands.

"The difference between London and Bristol and Liverpool today is its continuity, that's what makes it different and distinctive from any other community. It's the oldest in Europe simply because of its continuity. "

Ray Costello

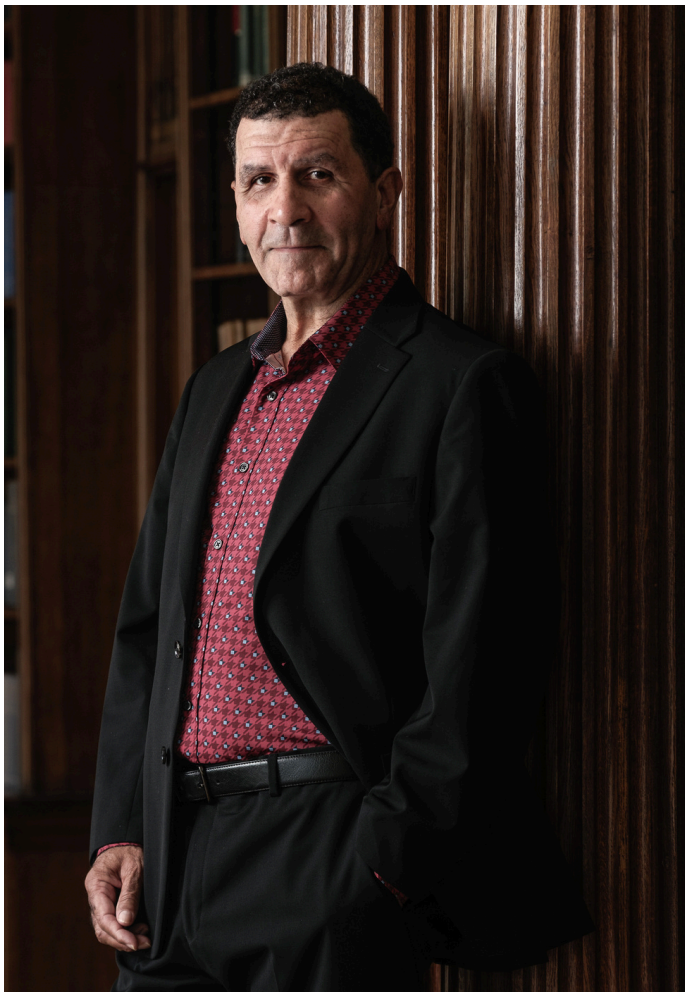
SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

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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