

LIVERPOOL BLACK SISTERS AND MARY SEACOLE HOUSE

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

"To provide support and advice for Black women in various forms of training which will lead to new job opportunities in jobs where Black women have been underrepresented; to raise the level of knowledge about the roles of Black women in history; to act as a catalyst to improve and develop training structures for Black women in any fields that they feel are appropriate; to provide an educational forum for the consideration of the advancement of Black women in fields which have previously been unknown or explored; to build and develop confidence within Black women in order that they may more easily cope successfully with their lives as Black women; to provide the space for women to meet together and to share their common experiences" - Statement of the goals of Liverpool Black Sisters

I've made it clear throughout this series that Black women in Liverpool 8 faced just about every challenge that Black men and other members of the L8 community faced. Black women also confronted obstacles that neither Black men nor white women confronted. These obstacles resulted from the interplay of racism and sexism across economic, political and social realms. **As individuals and in organisations a priority for Black women was always to tackle vile and abusive images of Black women and girls; and take action to challenge injustice and discrimination against Black women and girls across all sectors of society.**

BLACK WOMEN'S GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Black women worked hard to help the Black community in general and Black women and families in particular. They were active in all the community organisations in L8 that I've described in these articles so far, and once again, were often the majority in many of them. From South Liverpool Personnel to Blackburne House, and Charles Wootton College to Elimu Academy.

Centering Black women was a priority in the theatre, video and film-making of Bea Freeman, Barbara Phillips and Ann Carney. Black women attended African Liberation Day activities, were members of Delado African Drum and Dance Company, and worked in Steve Biko Housing Association.



Liverpool Black Sisters Anti Police March 1991

And they set up separate Black women's organisations to prioritise issues. National government, city authorities and mainstream institutions (employers, schools, hospitals, policing) failed to address these needs, paid them lip-service, and sometimes even caused them. Many white women and (separately) many Black men were no better. This was especially the case with regard to sexual threats and domestic violence. Black women were at the forefront of campaigns against racism in Liverpool police and the city council, as well as against the apartheid regime in South Africa.



Oxford Out March - Huck Magazine

Black women actively protested or campaigned against sexist and racist language in media, including music, film, television and the press. They pointed out how far more images of Black people in media were men and boys, rather than women and girls. They opposed racist portrayals of Black women as uneducated, unskilled, unemployed and poverty-stricken, as well as portrayals as subordinate and passive victims. Their foremost concern was with mainstream culture but they were also uneasy about representations in Black culture. For example, they were far more likely than men to challenge hyper-sexualised images in US films, hip hop and reggae music. They consistently challenged the casual use of offensive terms by men and boys in the L8 community describing Black women and girls – like “bird”, “chick”, “beef” and worse. They defended discrimination against all women – including white women – especially as many of the women active in these organisations had white mothers, sisters and aunts.

Black women’s lives were not consumed with activism and resistance. They found time to enjoy recreation and leisure, music, dancing and sport. And they found joy.

They listened to soul, funk and reggae music, enjoyed nightlife, watched films and television, and read Black writers. They made trips abroad, including to the United States, the West Indies and Africa. Like all the issues described in these articles so far, exactly how the issues unfolded in Black women’s lives was shaped by the unique circumstances of Black Liverpool.



Carnival Women’s Procession

LIVERPOOL BLACK SISTERS AND MARY SEACOLE HOUSE GOALS

In *Black Liverpool “The real thing”* I describe the work of two of the most important organisations in L8, Liverpool Black Sisters (LBS) and Mary Seacole House (MSH). Both groups were started by Black women (including those of mixed origins), and they exemplify the initiative, drive, leadership and perseverance of Black women. LBS began in the 1980s and prioritised the life-enhancing issues described in the quotation at the start of this article. The goal overall was to serve and empower women from Black and other racial minorities groups in the city. For example, Suzanne Morris described how LBS organised an after-school project for children in L8 as a way to cover childcare for working parents. LBS built on Black women’s previous activism that had crystallised in the establishment of the Black Women’s Group in the 1970s.

MSH opened in 1991 and was developed as a refuge and safe space to prioritise the mental health needs of all people in Liverpool 8, especially Black and racial minority women. MSH foregrounded health and medical issues, especially those that were uniquely or disproportionately faced by the Black community, like diabetes, sickle cell disease, and mental health. These issues were neglected by mainstream organisations. Neither LBS nor MSH had cultural transformation as the main priority but each organisation drew on transnational Black cultural flows to achieve some of their goals.

POSITIVE IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN

Both LBS and MSH made sure gender issues and Black women in history were addressed with concrete people, examples and episodes. They highlighted Black and other women in non-stereotypical roles – as activists for social justice, political, religious and spiritual leaders, writers and thinkers, and professionals.

This meant African women warriors defending their families and communities against European invasion, enslaved African women across the Americas prioritising family needs, enriching faith communities, analysing experiences in richly textured ways, and raising the community in business, academic, legal and medical professions.

In both organisations positive and powerful images of women and girls could be seen in posters and images on office walls, in the books shared, in the music played and in the various tasks undertaken by staff. Images of Afro-Americans were the most prevalent – like Angela Davis, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, bell hooks, June Jordan and Maya Angelou.

Images of Africans like Miriam Makeba and Winnie Mandela could be seen, as could images of West Indians like the women in the “I-Threes” group – Rita Marley, Marcia Griffiths and Judy Mowatt. Several of the women I interviewed mentioned books published by Allison and Busby, (Margaret Busby was born in Ghana), especially the innovative volume *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writing by Women of African Descent*. They got books from Source Books, Elimu Academy, Charles Wootton College and later on from Liverpool museums.

Liverpool Black Sisters

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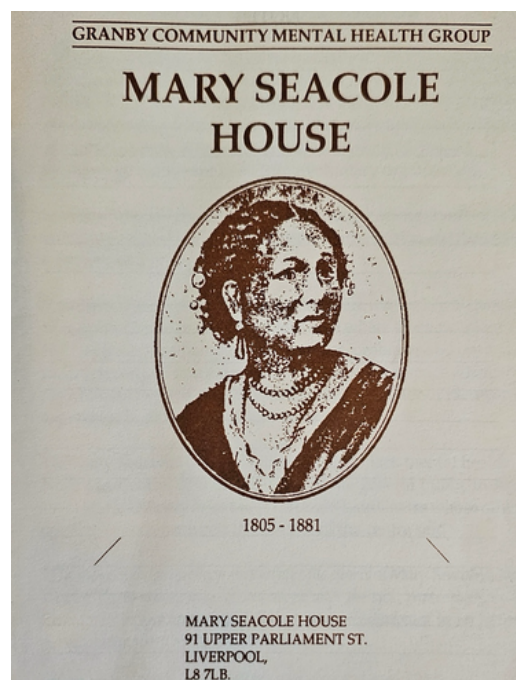
A BLACK WOMEN'S GROUP
WORKING TO IMPROVE THE
LIVES OF WOMEN IN LIVERPOOL



ANNUAL REPORT 1992/3

Liverpool Black Sisters Annual Report 1992/3

LBS had an image of a female African warrior on the front of their organisation's leaflet and annual reports. This countered the image from British schools and television that African women were nothing more than passive victims of slavery and imperialism. For MSH, the first and most important image was the naming of the organisation after Mary Seacole.



Mary Seacole House Leaflet

Mary Seacole House is probably the first building in Liverpool named after a Black woman. In the context of Liverpool in the 1970s, when Black people faced a constant barrage of racial stereotypes and caricatures of Black people in history as “slaves” in the Caribbean and “savages” in Africa, Mary Seacole was a very welcome exception, and positive Black female image and role model. This symbolic gesture stood as an antidote to the statues and street names in Liverpool named after white men that supported slavery and imperialism like the William Ewart Gladstone statue (in St John's Gardens, behind St. George's Hall), and (William) Huskisson Street (in L8).

Mary Seacole herself was born legally free in Jamaica in 1805, to a “creole” mother (meaning “mixed-race”) and a (white) Scottish father. She became skilled in folk medicine and apparently nursing, combining knowledge in Jamaica and African herbal treatments.

She gained experience across the Caribbean and in London. She made her way to Crimea, with her own funding, after facing racial abuse, discrimination and rejection in London. In Crimea she established a hotel and tended to British troops, offering food, providing basic medical assistance and boosting troop morale. Her name was linked to Florence Nightingale – the most famous nurse of the Crimea – though it's not clear they ever met. She died in London in 1881.

Mary Seacole's name had been promoted in Black communities across England before MSH was established in Liverpool, with a series of plaques, buildings and organisations named after her. The fact that she was of mixed origins and had a white father was not an issue of concern to Black people, though several white people campaigned that Mary Seacole was not really Black, but mixed-race. Many Black people saw this opposition as divisive and racist.

COURSES AND TRAINING

Both organisations created short courses and training, organised lectures and discussions to further Black women's knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence. In these courses Black women and children were central not marginal to Black men.

They highlighted Black women's roles and contributions in history and in contemporary society – in Africa, the Caribbean and England – They stressed Black women's roles in the economy, politics and culture. Suzanne Morris told me how LBS searched high and low for every positive image of Black women and girls they could find – posters, books, dolls and more – and made sure that young children saw them at every opportunity. Some attention was also paid to the history of Black seamen arriving in the city, which also meant attention to inter-racial marriage and children of mixed racial descent.

Michelle Charters, who became the director of Kuumba Millenium Centre when it opened at the start of the 2000s (and incorporated elements of Liverpool Black Sisters) saw a focus on Black History as a key issue of Black women and the L8 community more generally.

She had previously worked on a wide range of social justice activities with Liverpool Black Sisters as well as with Gloria Hyatt at Elimu Academy.



Gloria Hyatt Elimu Academy

PROTESTS, CAMPAIGNS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

Black women did far more than fighting against race and sexist stereotypes. For example, they were at the forefront – and once again often the majority – in protests, campaigns and activities for equality and social justice.



Merseyside Anti Apartheid Movement

Among some of the most well-known were Sandra Antigha and Carlene Montoute at the Adult Education Centre (later renamed the Charles Wootton Centre); Claire Dove in LBS and multiple organisations, Geraldine (Cookie) Ambrosius at South Liverpool Personnel, Paulette McCulloch at the Robert Jones, Dorothy Kuya at the Methodist; Maria O'Reilly and Sonia Bassy at the L8 Law Centre and the Consortium of Black Organisations; Gloria Hyatt and Michelle Charters at Elimu Academy, and Audrey Young at the European Poverty Three programme. They were at the forefront of massive anti-apartheid campaigns, and the Kick Samson Bond Out campaign in 1984. Many women supported Liz Drysdale, Liverpool's first Black city councilor elected for Labour in the Granby Ward of L8 in 1987.



Liverpool Black Women's Group No More Bondage

And many were involved in the arrangements, design and staging of the Caribbean Carnival. Very few women were involved in reggae sound systems as owners, performers or DJs, but they played significant supporting roles – providing resources, training and other types of support. And the fact that Black women were the managers, directors and staff at both LBS and MSH communicated their importance as role models in a direct manner. Needless to say, they attended cultural events of all kinds, for example, when June Jordan and Maya Angelou each performed in the city, and when Molefi Asante and Ali Mazrui spoke in the city in 2000.

THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY GALLERY AT THE MERSEYSIDE MARITIME MUSEUM

Black women played a crucial role in the

development of the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery (TSG) when it opened in 1994.

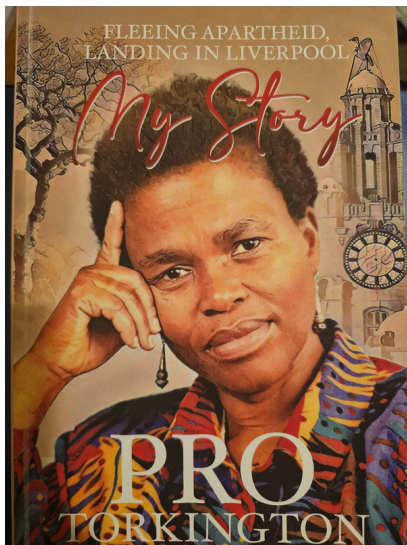
Several members of LBS were present at the first meeting in 1992 when the plans for the gallery were announced. At that meeting several Black women were against the very idea that white people should be the ones organising a gallery on slavery, especially as they had been the ones that brutalised Black women and men during slavery. Several pointed out that Liverpool museums had a long history of racial discrimination. Other Black women wanted to see the gallery open but only if it highlighted Black women's resistance, humanity, and dignity. They emphatically opposed images of disheveled, debased and subordinated women in slavery, and images of savage, barbaric and naked women in Africa. And they were outraged at how their children had to see such images in museums and schoolbooks. They also insisted that any images that appeared should be created by Black artists, especially Black women, rather than white artists.

Black women made sure they were represented among the Board of Advisors, guest curators, writers, and community contributors at the TSG. This included Dame Jocelyn Barrow, Alissandra Cummins (Director of the Barbados museum and Historical Society), Dr. Mary E Modupe Kolawole (Senior lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria), and Jennifer Morgan (Research Fellow at the University of South Carolina).

Black women did not get everything they wanted from the TSG but they got far more than had been intended by the gallery's organisers when it was first announced.

FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES FROM AFRICA

Both LBS and MSH had active members from families that traced their immediate origins to nations in Africa, (like Claire Dove and Pat Asije-Rooney); and they had members who were born and raised in Africa (like Protasia Torkington, Shirley Mashiane-Talbot – both from South Africa – and Alfred Babatunde Zack-Williams, known locally as "Tunde").



Pro Torkington

Their contributions were invaluable. For example, Torkington brought firsthand information and insights to people in L8 and the city about daily life for Africans in apartheid South Africa, information we could not get from news and television. She helped transfer funds from people in Liverpool to the struggle to overthrow apartheid, contributions that people in L8 were desperate to make but didn't always trust international organisations. She worked to ensure that her research led to action. And from her multiple trips back home she brought back images, photographs of life and culture in South Africa that she shared with local people.

Detailed insights into her life in South Africa, in Liverpool, and her work in both places can be found in the detailed personal narrative she has published in her recent biography - *Fleeing Apartheid, Landing in Liverpool*. I've read that book and it's a fascinating and engaging story. These firsthand experiences from Africa expanded the scope and enriched the quality of the work done in each organisation.

MULTIPLE DEMANDS AND COMPETING PRIORITIES

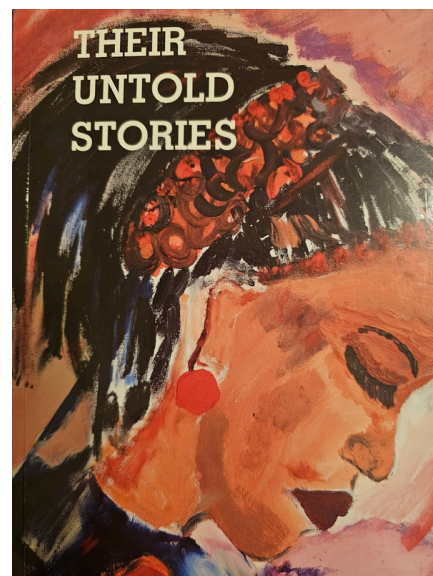
Clearly there were multiple simultaneous demands on Black women in L8 and many women found them burdensome, arduous and sometimes overwhelming.

There were successes, but there were failures too - lacking institutional and financial resources, some rivers were just too wide to cross.

Some individual women paid a heavy price in emotional health. But they persevered - **Black women were simply doing what they had been doing for decades, generations and centuries in Africa and across the diaspora. That is, living their lives and organising themselves in ways that would best enable them to achieve the goals and objectives that they set for themselves.**

For all these reasons and more that's why their story must be told in all its entirety, just as the story of the Black women that came before them must be told. I have not been able to tell the full story and someone far more immersed in their experiences will hopefully emerge to tell a more complete story.

"The very act of recounting one's experience can, in itself, be an important step in the healing process - it can be cathartic" - *Their Untold Stories, Granby Community Mental Health Group*



Their Untold Stories, - Granby Community Mental Health Group

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).

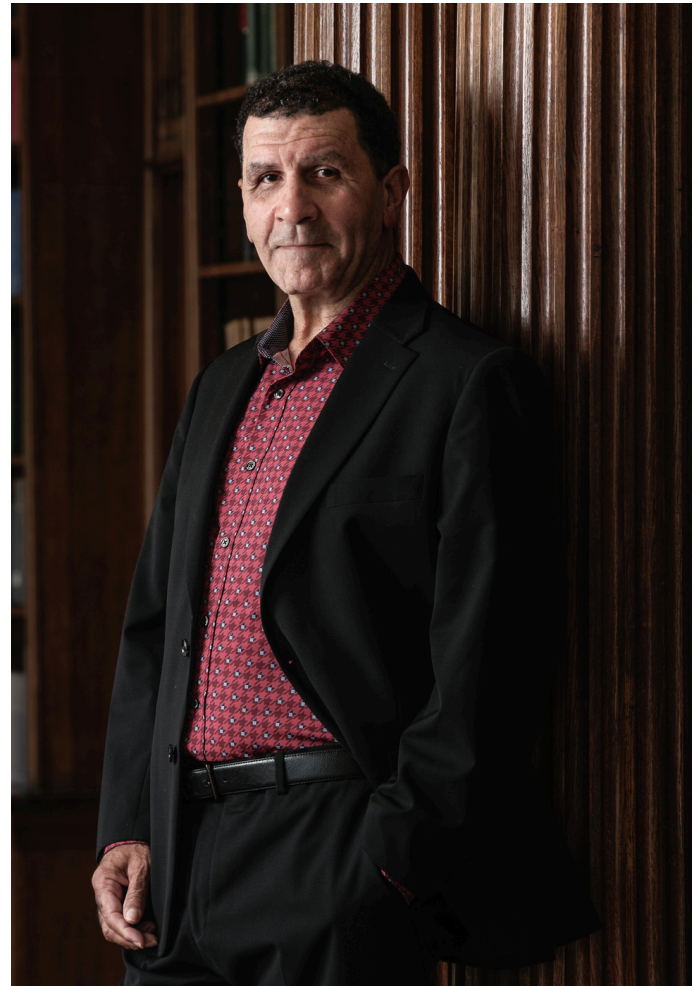


Photo credit to Ean Flanders