



The fire this time

Commentary by Black Kos Editor Denise Oliver Velez

It only takes a spark to start a fire.

Especially when there is plenty of tinder just waiting to become a conflagration.

How many years do the embers smolder waiting to erupt anew into a maelstrom of discontent and destruction?

In the case of England 30 years has only been a brief moment in time.

It was thirty years ago that the Brixton uprisings occurred.

And now London is in flames again.

I don't know how many of you know the history. I probably wouldn't know much of it myself if it weren't for two chance occurrences.

Long ago I never really thought about Britain much at all, except as a land of royalty, the triangle slave trade and colonies, the Beatles and Rolling Stones. I certainly didn't think of it as the home of black folks.

The rise of the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party here in the US, had wider consequences than just in the USA and though there was no internet, facebook or twitter at the time, the news media, underground left newspapers and books spread the word and found fertile soil in England.

And so Britain gained its own Panther Party "**The Brixton Panthers**".

Here are some of the members of the Brixton Black Panthers:

Althea Jones -medical doctor

Farukh Dhondi -broadcaster and writer

David Udah -church minister

Darcus Howe -broadcaster

Keith Spencer -community activist

Leila Hussain -community activist

Olive Morris -community activist

Liz Turnbull- community activist

Mala Sen -author

Beverly Bryan -academic and writer

Linton Kwesi Johnson -writer and musician

Neil Kenlock -photographer and founder of Choice FM London

This quote from an interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson published in 1998 by Classical Reggae Interviews, describes the work and ethos of the Brixton Black Panthers: "It was an organization that came in to combat racial oppression, to combat police brutality, to combat injustices in the courts against black people, to combat discrimination at the place of work, to combat the mis-education of black youths and black young people.

These names may ring no bell for us here in the U.S.-but they had an impact on young people affected by both the rigid class system in the UK and the growing racist opposition to a growing population of people of color.



Olive Morris

Olive was a member of the British Black Panthers, as well as a founding member of the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) and the Brixton Black Women's Group. The breadth of her political work went from her pioneer role in the local squatter campaigns in South London, through to organizing with Black women and the student movement in London and Manchester, to supporting liberation movements in the Third World.



Linton Kwesi Johnson

Linton Kwesi Johnson (aka LKJ) (born 24 August 1952, Chapelton, Jamaica) is a UK-based dub poet. He became the second living poet, and the only black poet, to be published in the Penguin Classics series. His poetry involves the recitation of his own verse in Jamaican Patois over dub-reggae, usually written in collaboration with renowned British reggae producer/artist Dennis Bovell.

Johnson studied for a degree in sociology at Goldsmiths College in New Cross, London (graduating in 1973), [2] which currently holds his personal papers in its archives; in 2004 he became an Honorary Visiting Professor of Middlesex University in London. In 2005 he was awarded a silver Musgrave medal from the Institute of Jamaica for distinguished eminence in the field of poetry. While still at school he joined the British Black Panther Movement, helped to organize a poetry workshop within the movement, and developed his work with Rasta Love, a group of poets and drummers. Most of Johnson's poetry is political, dealing mainly with the experiences of being an African-Caribbean in Britain, "Writing was a political act and poetry was a cultural weapon...", he told an interviewer in 2008. However, he has also written about other issues, such as British foreign policy or the death of anti-racist marcher Blair Peach. His most celebrated poems were written during the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The poems contain graphic accounts of the alleged racist police brutality occurring at the time (cf. Sonny's Lettah).

We had Panthers in Britan, Panthers in France and Panthers in Germany. In 1971 I left the US to head to Algiers to join the international section of the BPP in Algeria, and to travel in Europe with Kathleen Cleaver, where I met European Panthers, and black nationalists- some born in the Caribbean and others from Africa.

We had riots or rebellions (use whichever term you wish) here in the U.S. sparked by untenable racial and economic conditions in Harlem and Detroit, and others after the

assassination of MLK. No surprise then that in "merry olde England" several communities ignited over similar conditions and concerns.

Uprising sparked a wave of revolt

The flames rose above Brixton, home to one of the largest black communities in London, for two nights on 10-11 April 1981. Police struggled to crush the uprising against their own racist brutality and against poverty. Over 7,000 police officers, a third of the Metropolitan force, did eventually regain control. But Brixton rose again at the beginning of July 1981 alongside young people in inner cities across Britain. The first Brixton riot was the most severe urban disorder in post-war British history up to that point. It terrified Margaret Thatcher's deeply unpopular government and the wider establishment. It inspired a spirit of resistance to police thugs in inner city areas which continues to this day. And it struck a powerful blow for unity between black and white working class people.

Racism from the police triggered the Brixton riot and those that followed in the summer of 1981. But it was not a "race riot"-a war of white against black. It was a class riot of the poor and dispossessed. The police launched a massive operation in Brixton four days before the riot. They poured in 100 extra plainclothes officers as part of "Operation Swamp 81". At the same time they were refusing to seriously investigate a fire in Deptford, a few miles away, which had killed 13 young black people three months before. In four days the police in Brixton stopped 943 people and arrested 118, over half of them black. Then on Friday evening, 10 April, the police bundled Michael Bailey, a 19 year old black man who was bleeding from a stab wound, into a police car. No ambulance was called. A crowd gathered. The police car did not move. So people freed him and the police attacked them. Running battles continued for hours. Plainclothes and uniformed police stepped up the repression the following day. They arrested a 28 year old black man who was waving at a friend in Atlantic Road. "Black and white people went over to try and help, but in the end six policemen threw him in a van," said an eyewitness. "By now everyone was angry." Police steamed into the crowds of Saturday shoppers. That's when the battle started. Years of burning anger poured out.

Afro-Caribbean people were just 6 percent of London's population. They accounted for 44 percent of those arrested under the "sus" stop and search law in the late 1970s. Unemployment was soaring and the official figure was to reach three million (an underestimate) in the summer of 1981. Young people were hardest hit, and black young people especially so. Some 55 percent of black men under the age of 19 in Brixton were officially unemployed. Twelve months earlier 2,000 people-two thirds black, one third white-had rioted in St Pauls, Bristol, after a police raid on a club. Now people in Brixton fought back too. They turned burnt out police vans into barricades. Police came under fire from petrol bombs on Leeson Road, the first time they were widely used in Britain. The press spoke of mindless violence. It was anything but. Some 61 police vehicles were damaged or destroyed, as against only 19 private vehicles. The Windsor Castle pub went up in flames-people had complained for years about its racist door policy. A bus was hijacked and driven at the police. Scores of shops were looted. Other buildings such as the community-based Social Action Centre were left alone. Scarlet Macguire, a journalist for the IRN news agency, reported, "Everyone I spoke to lived within three or four blocks of where I was at the time. There was organisation. All the people I spoke to were politically aware. They hated the way they were treated, the way the police have provoked and harassed them for years. This wasn't a race riot. It was really cut and dried. It was the community against the police."

I went to England in 1981 - no longer as an active Panther, but as the Executive Director of the Black Filmmaker Foundation to attend a black activist film festival in London organized by Parminder Vir.

Producer Parminder Vir was born in India but, at the age of ten, joined her father in Southampton, England, along with her mother and two sisters...Throughout her career, Vir has championed ethnic and cultural diversity in the film and television industry, spearheading the Cultural Diversity Network, an industry-wide organization committed to diversity in output and employment



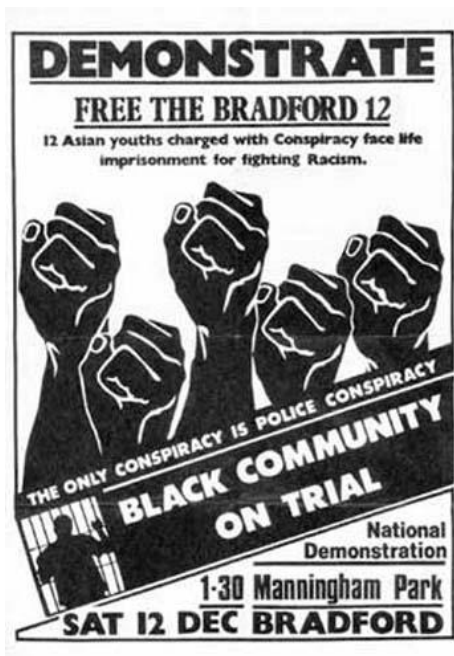
Parminder Vir

Much to my surprise - when we arrived in London many of the black filmmakers who awaited us were not "black" by our US definition - most were South Asian.



United Black Youth League

How curious. The phenomenon of South Asians defining themselves as "black" was very different from the situation in the US. Parmindir took us to visit "black" communities - like Brixton, and also "black" communities like Bradford, where we met community activists, artists and organizers. As a consequence I paid attention to the case of the Bradford 12, which reminded me of our US Panther 21 case.



The eruptions in Britain caused by police brutality and racial inequity in 1981 resulted in a government response called **The Scarman Report**

According to the Scarman report, the riots were a spontaneous outburst of built-up resentment sparked by particular incidents. Lord Scarman stated that "complex political, social and economic factors" created a "disposition towards violent protest". The Scarman report highlighted problems of racial disadvantage and inner-city decline, warning that "urgent action" was needed to prevent racial disadvantage becoming an "endemic, ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of our society".

Scarman found unquestionable evidence of the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of 'stop and search' powers by the police against black people. The report details the use of arbitrary roadblocks, the stopping and searching of pedestrians and mass detention (943 stops, 118 arrests and 75 charges). Operation Swamp 81 was conducted by the police without any consultation with the community or the home-beat officers. Liaison arrangements between police, community and local authority had collapsed before the riots and according to the Scarman report, the local community mistrusted the police and their methods of policing. Scarman recommended changes in training and law enforcement, and the recruitment of more ethnic minorities into the police force. According to the report "institutional racism" did not exist and positive discrimination to tackle racial disadvantage was "a price worth paying".

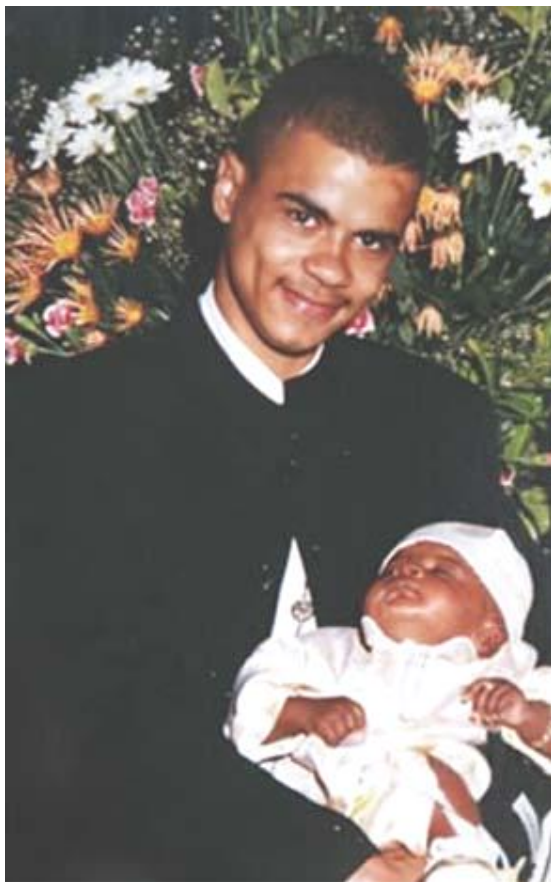


A side-effect of the report had an impact on British media - which had few people of color on the telly or the silver screen.

In part, the 1981 civil disturbances and ensuing Scarman Report, which highlighted the cultural marginalisation of the UK's ethnic minorities, forced a review of funding and cultural policies towards black arts practitioners in the public sphere. In 1982, Channel 4 was launched with a specific multicultural remit for minority audiences, further creating the framework for its subsequent support of British independent and black film-making throughout the 1980s and onwards with Film on Four. The now-defunct Greater London Council, other local authorities and arts organisations also initiated funding, training and development programmes for black people in the film industry. In 1983, for example, the GLC staged the 'Third Eye' film exhibition of rarely seen Third World and black films. The Workshop Declaration of 1981, which enlisted the backing of Channel 4, the BFI, the GLC and other arts and trade organisations, supported grant-aided film and video workshops and collectives within the independent film sector. Meanwhile, independent production companies such as Kuumba Productions, Azad Productions and Social Film and Video undertook commissions in the commercially viable private sector. Sankofa Film Collective, Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo and British Asian outfit Retake were among those whose theory orientated first-generation media and film school graduates produced an explosion of experimental black British creativity in the black workshop sector.

Here in the US, the civil rights movement and explosive eruptions affected a similar cosmetic change to the color of media - but underlying conditions of economic systemic racism effected little foundational change.

So 30 years after Brixton there was a spark in Tottenham. Provided by the death of Mark Duggan.



The Guardian reports **Doubts emerge over Duggan shooting as London burns**

Doubts have emerged over whether Mark Duggan, whose death at the hands of police sparked the weekend's Tottenham riots, was killed during an exchange of fire . The Guardian understands that initial ballistics tests on a bullet, found lodged in a police radio worn by an officer during Thursday's incident, suggested it was police issue – and therefore had not been fired by Duggan. On Saturday night 26 police officers were injured, eight requiring hospital treatment, in clashes with around 300 rioters in Tottenham that saw buildings and vehicles torched, shops looted and residents forced to flee their homes. Police have arrested 55 people as a major investigation began into the escalation of violence, which followed a peaceful demonstration to demand "justice" for Duggan, 29, a father of four shot dead on Thursday evening after being stopped in a taxi near Tottenham Hale. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) has launched an inquiry into the shooting.

Community leaders said they warned Tottenham police immediately before Saturday's rioting that a peaceful protest over the fatal shooting could get out of control. More than 100 people who demanded to see a senior officer at Tottenham police station feared that if they were still there by nightfall it could cause problems in an area with tensions running high. Stafford Scott, a community organizer who accompanied the family of the shot man, said: "If a senior police officer had come to speak to us, we would have left. We arrived at 5pm, we had planned a one-hour silent protest. We were there until 9pm. Police were absolutely culpable. Had they been more responsive when we arrived at the police station, asking for a senior officer to talk with the family, we would have left the vicinity before the unrest started." "It is unforgivable police refused dialogue. We know the history here – how can Tottenham have a guy killed by police on Thursday, and resist requests for dialogue from the community 48 hours later?"

There were also claims police were warned on Thursday night and Friday morning by people with knowledge of Tottenham there could be "significant" community reaction to Duggan's death.

Duggan's fiancée, Simone Wilson, 29, said the family had not wanted trouble, only answers. "When we were outside the police station last night we wanted someone to come out. We want some answers. I have not even told my children that he is dead because we cannot give them any answers." Of the violence, Wilson said: "I am not happy about what has happened. We didn't want this trouble. We wanted some answers."

And the flames spread.

Ask yourselves...why riots or rebellions? Are all young people simply thugs, gang bangers and looters? (read news comments sections sprinkled liberally with other terms like "animals" and n-words)

I say there are two underlying factors which cannot be ignored. No one likes their neighborhoods to burn. No one applauds violence. But no one seems to be willing to deal with the facts that unless underlying causes are dealt with; the fires will continue to erupt on both sides of the pond.

Let's take a closer look.