

Readers, Writers, and Riots: Race, Print Culture, and the Public in Liverpool 8 in the Early 1980s

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Abstract This article analyzes the print culture of the Black and multiethnic community known as L8 in the northern British city of Liverpool. Through a critique of printed materials, including newsletters, magazines, and pamphlets all written, produced and read within the locale, the author assesses the construction of a community that was at once imagined and lived. This print infrastructure facilitated a collective sense of L8 as a marker of identity and belonging in a city and a nation that otherwise often harbored racialized hostility to the residents' economic and political interests. Such a commitment to the locale, the author asserts, became a key factor in organizing the collective action taken by the residents in the 1981 Toxteth protests. Before and after that event, the neighborhood's print culture served to justify to residents the reasons for taking violent action against the state. Equally, this source material highlights the fissures and divergences between neighbors in their deliberations over the definitions—and limitations—of such a community and its relation to the nation. The author thus offers new ways to think about Black British protest in close relation to the specific political and social dynamics of neighborhoods across Britain.

In early autumn 1979, a resident of the Liverpool 8 Neighborhood, also known as Toxteth, was outraged by the behavior of patrons of a local café.¹ As the café had no toilet, the offenders were urinating regularly on the corner of Cawdor Street in daylight in front of children and “women shoppers.”² The resident was bothered enough to write to the community newspaper, the *Granby Gazette*, to rally its neighborhood-based readership and to see what the community officer could do about it. “We may only be poor people living around here,” wrote the resident, “but surely we don’t have to put up with that.” The letter-writer signed off in emphatic fashion by noting the importance of the local neighborhood for their sense of personal identity: “LIVERPOOL 8 BORN AND BRED, AND PROUD OF IT.”

The community officer duly replied that a small group of neighborhood-based volunteers had been fighting the city council “for ages” for the erection of a toilet block

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¹ As I explain later in the essay, Liverpool 8, or L8, was the name that residents gave their neighborhood. Toxteth was the title given to it by the national media during and after the so-called Toxteth Riots in 1981. “Toxteth Riots” is a term that, as I address below, is inaccurate and derogatory.

² “No Joke,” *Granby Gazette*, 4 September 1979. All referenced issues of the *Gazette* are from the uncatalogued private collection of Ken Pyc. This first issue did not have a number, with numbering beginning at 1 with the second publication. I have kept this system.

in the vicinity but that, in typical fashion, the “corporation” refused.³ The battle for this toilet block is perhaps not in itself the stuff of history; the exchange in the *Gazette*, however, is symptomatic of a method of organizing deployed by neighbors through Liverpool 8’s local newsletters, magazines, and pamphlets, to protest against the council, police and national government. That print infrastructure was a key means through which residents in this multiethnic area converged around political campaigns, made claims against the authorities, and fought collectively to improve their life chances. Often such campaigns centered around the racial violence of the police, the institutional racism of the city council, and the severe economic inequality faced by many of the neighbors. This intra-community collaboration made for, as the resident who complained about public urinating makes clear, a resounding sense of neighborhood exceptionalism that often transcended ethnic and social barriers. These neighborly, multiethnic networks intersected with notions of antiracist protest in L8, illustrating more broadly Black British protest as entrenched in locality.

Studies in Black British history have in recent years turned to such local contexts as a way of dissecting the particularity of Black experiences across the nation. This trend to some extent follows the expansion of collections in public archives pertaining to local Black histories. Widely revered recent studies of Black Britain, such as Rob Waters’s *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985*, Kennetta Hammond Perry’s *London Is the Place for Me*, and Marc Matera’s *Black London*, all delve into collections held in the nation’s capital to greatly expand our understanding of twentieth-century Black British pasts that are nonetheless London-centric.⁴ Emerging in tandem with these views of metropolitan Black life are focused assessments of Black parochial neighborhoods, studies that include Kieran Connell’s exhaustive investigation of Handsworth in Birmingham and Shirin Hirsch’s examination of race and locality in Wolverhampton.⁵ This geographical broadening out of Black British history is a crucial addition to the construction of any national conceptualization of Black Britishness. As James Procter succinctly explains, diasporas to Britain have not landed and remained in one region or locality but have “devolved” to settle across the country.⁶ For the individual migrant, such devolution could mean journeying to London, the port side of Bristol, the manufacturing centers of the midlands or, in the footsteps of C. L. R. James and Learie Constantine, the small towns of rural Lancashire.⁷ Such varying trajectories meant that experiences of Black Britishness altered significantly, not least due to fluctuations in the type of reception the migrants experienced across localities. In this article, I venture north, to examine the Black experience in a relatively understudied region, that of Liverpool, which itself had an awkward relation to Britain. By the 1980s, an old and dilapidated port with a long history of imperial migration, the city was regularly marginalized and maligned in the British imagination.

³ “No Joke,” *Granby Gazette*, 4 September 1979.

⁴ Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (Oakland, 2018); Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015).

⁵ Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* (Oakland, 2018); Shirin Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality, and Resistance* (Manchester, 2018).

⁶ James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester, 2003), 4.

⁷ Jeffrey Hill, *Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire* (London, 2018).

In the turn to the local, the tendency of scholars has, understandably, been to assess the transnational dynamics of Britain's urban centers. Connell, for instance, illustrates a vibrant tradition of Black internationalism in Handsworth. Likewise, Waters argues that the reading of print culture, especially that from the United States, provided a means through which a shared, national, form of "thinking black" emerged in Britain.⁸ In this article, I concentrate on the intra-local practices of reading, writing, and correspondence in L8's print culture as opposed to focusing on the locale's relations to the international. This is by no means to reject the international as relevant but rather to emphasize a multidirectionality by working toward a more grassroots, bottom-up, Black British history. In examining L8's community newsletters, such as the *Granby Gazette* and the *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin*, as well as pamphlets and magazines, a distinctly local vernacular emerges through which neighbors shared strategies for dealing with the problems of economic, social, and political disenfranchisement in both national and city contexts.⁹ Such strategies were put into dynamic dialogue with each other through these publications as readers and writers implicitly and explicitly responded to one another's views. Readerships were made proximate through their joint reading of this material and through living side by side as neighbors. This print material is thus vital for working through the transcendences and conflicts within this multiethnic community so that our understanding of Black protest is nuanced by its relation to the political, cultural, and social demographics of the neighborhood.

The newsletters catered to a variety of readers and writers in L8, some of whom identified as Black and some who did not. Indeed, if Waters asserts that "black radical politics in Britain was organized around thinking black, and thinking black was organized around print culture," then this locally organized print culture in this multiethnic area of Liverpool needs to be assessed in order to understand neighborhood Black political activity in relation to local political concerns and campaigns that were both textually and geographically proximate.¹⁰ What emerges in this analysis is a network of readers and writers, not all of whom necessarily became members of community groups, or of neighborhood antiracist organizations like the Liverpool Black Organisation or the Liverpool Defence Committee, but nevertheless joined in a more diffuse movement against racial and structural inequality. Printed materials were used to rally the neighborhood to protest, through pen and through violent protest, against perceived threats.

I illustrate how this culture of protest in L8 came to full force for the locality's key moment of protest in 1981, the so-called Toxteth Riots. This conflict was the largest instance of violence against the state on the British mainland since the Second World War, drawing the attention of city, national, and world media outlets.¹¹ Yet the event has been the focus of relatively little scholarship.¹² These protests and broader acts of

⁸ Waters, *Thinking Black*, 68.

⁹ Because of the importance of language and a commitment to recovering the perspectives and ideas of residents from L8, I quote them extensively.

¹⁰ Waters, *Thinking Black*, 68.

¹¹ For international attention, specifically in the United States, see the testimony of Claire Dove in Diane Frost and Richard Phillips, *Liverpool '81: Remembering the Riots* (Liverpool, 2011), 13.

¹² John Belchem provides the most comprehensive, in-depth analysis of these protests in a chapter-length study. He uses primarily the documents of the city council, with some reference to *Black Linx* magazine. Belchem, *Before the Windrush*. Diane Frost's book offers an important collection of memories and some primary sources concerning the protest but does not provide an in-depth critical analysis. Frost, *Liverpool '81*, 225–50. Simon Peplow provides an excellent analysis of other Black protests at this time, placing

protest in L8 took place within what Gail Lewis calls an “arc of protest” that began with demonstrations in Southall against the murder of Blair Peach by police in 1979 and carried on through to the Tottenham protests of 1985.¹³ The protests formed a series of events characterized by protagonists’ objections to the institutional racism of state forces, the rise of the National Front and the far right, and decreasing economic opportunities for working-class communities brought on by Thatcher’s neoliberal policies. The Toxteth uprising thus formed part of a nexus of campaigns that shaped British politics in the 1980s, including the 1984–85 Miner’s Strike.¹⁴ Concomitantly, the particular set of grievances voiced through L8’s print culture illustrates the fracturing of alliances between leftist and antiracist groups in the fight against the rising power of neoliberalism and the far right. The ascendancy of the socialist wing of the Labour Party, Militant, to assume power over Liverpool City Council, with the avowed rejection of addressing any inequality based on the premise of race, was cause for great concern and anger in L8. The violent protest formed part of an ideological reaction against the growing threats to the community from the political right in the national context, thereby allying the protestors with leftist anti-Thatcherites. At the same time, protesters fought against the racist tendencies of parochial leftist groups.

I consider these forms of Black British protest as coming out of localized, everyday, neighborhood political cultures. As one resident-turned-writer explained to their neighborhood in stark terms, it was the everyday plurality of the effects of racism that needed to be undone: “[M]ost Black people already know that racism damages our day-to-day lives in one thousand and one insidious ways.”¹⁵ The culture of Black protest in Britain was entrenched in this everyday, locally experienced and expressed insidiousness. The specific articulations and manifestations of the protests against the racism of the British state were contingent upon discussions hosted in L8’s print culture: here the problems posed were intellectualized and discussed so that a collective yet multifaceted response emerged in the neighborhood. Indeed, as a mouthpiece for many of the residents, these texts provide unique insights into residents’ specific justifications for violent protest. I thereby provide new insights into the intellectual and political context of Black protest in 1980s Britain as rooted in neighborhood deliberations, discussions, and debates.

L8 was, to use Connell’s term, one of Britain’s “race-relations capitals” in the 1980s.¹⁶ For many years, Black residents seeking accommodation elsewhere in the city had faced discrimination from estate agents and landlords and racist attacks from would-be neighbors.¹⁷ In banding together in L8, residents created a safe

them in an antiracist, Black Power tradition. Simon Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain* (Manchester, 2019). See also Alice Butler, “Toxic Toxteth: Understanding Press Stigmatization of Toxteth during the 1981 Uprising,” *Journalism* 21, no. 4 (2019): 541–56.

¹³ Gail Lewis, “Our Memories of the Uprisings,” British Library, podcast audio, 56:39, accessed 2 January 2022, <https://m.soundcloud.com/the-british-library/our-memories-of-the-uprisings>.

¹⁴ On such solidarity, see Diarmaid Kelliher, “Constructing a Culture of Solidarity: London and the British Coalfields in the Long 1970s,” *Antipode* 49, no. 1 (2017): 106–24.

¹⁵ “This Issue Affects You!,” *Black Linx*, December 1984, 2.

¹⁶ Connell, *Black Handsworth*, 4.

¹⁷ Gideon Ben-Tovim et al., *Racial Disadvantage in Liverpool—An Area Profile* (1980), H305.800.942, p. 33, Liverpool Record Office, Liverpool Central Library.

space. The national and city media played on this concentration of the municipality's Black population in L8 to present the area as a place of racial alterity, an "internal other" that was in Liverpool and Britain but not of the city or nation.¹⁸ Yet this was *not* a neighborhood with a majority Black or nonwhite population. Even in Granby, which served as the focal point of the area's Black community, housing the Black community centers, shops, clubs, education facilities, and a housing advice center, Black inhabitants made up only around 30 percent of residents.¹⁹ Of these inhabitants, 35 percent identified as "Black British" or "mixed race."²⁰ In the 1980s, L8 was thus a multiethnic constituency, with the majority of its Black residents having been born in the country, often to parents of mixed marriages. Other ethnic communities in the area included South Asian, Chinese, Arab, Somali, and the more recently arrived African and Caribbean settlers.²¹ Most of those living in the neighborhood racialized as white.²² The plurality of ethnicities in the vicinity and the high number of white residents problematizes the notion that L8 should be essentialized as a Black neighborhood. Instead, this example illustrates that experiences of Black Britishness need to be placed in relation to the political territory of locality. As the diaspora devolved across Britain, Black migrants grappled with the respective social and political landscapes of the local to build distinctive cultural and political communities. I thereby excavate and complicate the rich intellectualism and political activity of L8 as part of a broader effort to recover, in its geopolitical variety, the often silenced and discredited wealth and complexity of Black political thought burgeoning across Britain by the early 1980s.

There was, indeed, a great deal of community convergence across ethnicities in L8 in this period so that "Liverpool 8" became a unifying marker of identity across this neighborhood of Black, white, and diasporic citizens. As the complainant about public urination voiced in explicit terms, it was a great source of shared pride for residents to be from and of this neighborhood. At the same time, the conversations and articles hosted in the area's printed materials illustrate points at which neighbors diverged and disagreed over strategies to be deployed against the state. For instance, the *Granby Gazette*, with its white editorship, defended the right of residents to violently protest against police brutality, but it also encouraged its readers to enter into dialogue with those in law enforcement to reach reconciliation. The Black radical *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin* agreed that violent protest was appropriate but went further than the *Gazette* in that it rejected any dialogue with a police force that the editors perceived as inherently racist and oppressive. The locale's print culture is thus unique as a historical source in that it gestures toward to a local network of political synergies and divergences between antiracist and anti-state groups that are crucial for understanding Black protest in Britain. To illustrate these diverging and

¹⁸ On the internal other, see Belchem, *Before the Windrush*, 18.

¹⁹ In these statistics, "Black" is used to denote people who identified as of African descent.

²⁰ Ben-Tovim, *Racial Disadvantage*, 31.

²¹ Seventy percent of residents identified as white. For further nuance: community leaders at the time judged there to be around twenty thousand Black British; eight thousand Chinese; four thousand Asian; three thousand African; three thousand West Indian; and two thousand combined Arab and Somali. Ben-Tovim, *Racial Disadvantage*, 9.

²² I use lowercase *w* for "white" in this article in accordance with the style conventions of the journal. However, I am referring to "white" as a constructed category and a performed political position, much in the same way that "Black" (with a capital *B*) is used throughout.

converging political agenda and expectations, I offer an assessment of transcendence and community construction in L8's print culture to examine the tensions between readers and residents. I also provide an analysis of how printed materials justified and promoted action in the Toxteth protests and examine the fissures that opened up in relation to the ranging strategies toward the state in the aftermath of the conflict.

NEIGHBORHOOD PRINT CULTURE AND L8 EXCEPTIONALISM

Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking work makes clear the importance of printed material, especially newspapers, to the creation of national loyalties by generating a shared nationwide sense of belonging.²³ The print culture of L8, which was ephemeral, haphazard in its production, and subversive of national economic and political structures, aided in the creation of affinities to the local neighborhood so that an alternative public sphere took shape. In these newsletters, the residents of L8 encountered the daily tribulations of their neighbors; read about marriages, illnesses, and deaths; sent personal notes of thanks to fellow community figures; found out the fate of the local football team; and were kept informed on social activities of the various community centers dotted around the locale. These newsletters reflected on the fabric of L8 community life, engendering a sociability between residents. If, as Anderson posits, nationalist sentiments emerged out of shared reading experiences, then in L8 the distribution and reception of newsletters like the *Gazette* engendered a shared sense of belonging and pride in the area.²⁴ Indeed, with a circulation of six thousand, the newsletter was posted through virtually every letter box in the neighborhood. Through the area's print culture, and the social events that it promoted, the disparate communities and ethnicities of L8 often came together in an alternative public sphere to that of the nation. While the national press maligned this neighborhood as a Black place that stood in opposition to British principles of law and order, the neighborhood print culture promoted the very notion of L8 as a point of unification across its residents' individual identities. In line with this alterity, the residents of L8 often expressed in these newsletters opposition to the British state, especially to the proximate threats of the local city council and the police. The deep emotional extent of this affinity to the neighborhood, united in its opposition to such figures of the state, is put in simple and evocative terms by one protestor reflecting on the Toxteth protests: "[E]ven after all this time I can feel a rush . . . To see the power of people, a community united as one with one target . . . People may call it anarchy, but this was a message from the people."²⁵ In this sense, L8 was as much an imagined community in its own right as it was a geographically defined area. The neighborhood's print culture allows us to understand the intricacies of the

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

²⁴ The *Gazette* was of course by no means the only source of civic pride in the area. Aaron Andrews notes that those who traveled through L8 in the 1970s remarked on the scrubbed pavements and polished door-knockers as a response to neighborhood deprivation. See Aaron Andrews, "Dereliction, Decay and the Problem of De-industrialization in Britain, c. 1968–1977," *Urban History* 47, no. 2 (2020): 236–56.

²⁵ "David," quoted in Frost and Phillips, *Liverpool '81*, 9.

message that the people of L8 were conveying, and the political project of the protestors more specifically.

L8's print infrastructure joined a long tradition of Black British press dating back to the nineteenth century.²⁶ By the 1980s, the Black publishing scene was multifaceted, with houses such as the Guyanese-owned Bogle-L'Ouverture and Hansib producing book-length monographs and national newspapers for Black reading communities. These low-budget institutions added to the many smaller printers spread throughout Britain, reflecting the devolution of Black and Asian diasporas. Much of the local print culture was produced on a tiny budget, using machines like the hand-mechanized Gestetner and operating out of living rooms, community centers, and cafés. Most of these resources, including the *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin*, came into being in direct response to a lack of representation in local media outlets. Liverpool's *Daily Post*, for instance, had refused requests from L8 representatives for a regular column on the news of the neighborhood. The *Post* catered instead, like the city council, to the interests of Liverpooldians outside L8. Within the history of Black British publishing, local print culture forms a particular subgenre as these writings took up an introverted gaze to focus on the perceived problems within respective neighborhoods. Indeed, these local Black publications were not always or necessarily concerned with providing theoretical or philosophical reflections on the plight of Black people across the nation and the globe. They instead served more as places for political practitioners; they were sites of campaigning around the specific issues and pains felt directly in their respective communities (see figure 1).²⁷

In this focused way, such community-based political activity was often, at least in the case of L8, directed against the national state, and especially the city council, for their perceived institutional racism. The neighborhood's newsletters not only drummed up support by publishing the offenses of the council and government but also helped to organize this anti-state sentiment by, to some extent, systematizing and making regular relations between neighborhood activists, thus becoming powerful agents of localization.²⁸ In the absence of any one particular neighborhood group in L8 that a resident could join, the print culture was crucial in drawing together and sustaining a more idiosyncratically formed network of neighbors,

²⁶ For example, see Robert Wedderburn and John Burn's pamphlet, *The Axe Laid to the Root, Or A Fatal Blow to the Oppressor: Being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of the Island* (London, 1817); *The African Times and Orient Review* (1912–1920); Harold Moody and Una Marson, eds., *The Keys: The Official Organ of the League of Coloured Peoples* (London, 1933). On post-Windrush publications, see Bill Schwarz, "Claudia Jones and the *West Indian Gazette*: Reflections on the Emergence of Post-colonial Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2001): 264–85; Naomi Oppenheim, "Popular History in the Black British Press: Edward Scobie's *Tropic and Flamingo*, 1960–64," *Immigrants and Minorities* 38, nos. 1–2 (2020): 1–27. Many of the Windrush migrants would have had an experience of print cultures in the Caribbean due to the saliency of small- and medium-sized presses in the islands. See Clare Irving, "Printing the West Indies: Literary Magazines and the Anglophone Caribbean, 1920s–1950s" (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2015); Chris Moffat, "Against 'Cultures of Hiatus': History and the Archive in the Political Thought of John La Rose," *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (2018): 39–54, at 44.

²⁷ On the tradition of Black British resistance practitioners versus theorists, see Moffat, "Against 'Cultures of Hiatus.'"

²⁸ On the role of print in the systematization of connections in networks, see Simon Potter, "Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007): 621–46.

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THE GRANBY GAZETTE.

THE NEWSLETTER SERVING THE GRANBY TRIANGLE AREA.

ISSUE NO 24

SPRING 1982. (JANUARY - MAY)

PLEASE SEND YOUR LETTERS, NOTICES, STORIES, ARTICLES & ADVERTS TO: The Editor, The Granby Gazette, The Community Office, 99 Mulgrave Street, Liverpool L6 2TD.

WHO RULES GRANBY? THE PEOPLE OR THE VILLAINS?

All people in Granby want to do, is live their lives decently, and in peace and quiet. Unfortunately, a vicious minority of thugs, muggers, thieves, drivers of fast and often stolen cars and motorcycles, people who throw stones at taxis and buses and who assault and rob pensioners and who attack bobbies on the beat, are doing their best to make a quiet, ordinary life impossible! This minority of villains are both black and white, and come from not only outside the area but from within Liverpool & itself, therefore attacking and robbing their own people!

One resident from Beaconfield Street said, "It is as if these cats are trying to take over!", and another resident who witnessed a mugging, was told by the muggers to, "keep your mouth shut, or your kids will get battered and your house will be set on fire!".

Some of the people who have been causing disturbances on Granby recently, have been heard to say that if the Police try to arrest them it will be 'Police Harassment' and there will be a riot!

The lawful arrest of a criminal such as a thief or a mugger of itself, cannot be harassment, it is too easy to make that parrot-cry, and in fact it is not only an insult to people who have a genuine complaint

CONTINUED OVERLEAF.....

MONEY SHORTAGE DELAYS GAZETTE

Readers will be only too aware that this is the first GAZETTE since December 1981, and the Community Officer apologises for this. Lack of funds has been the main problem.

The typists strike delayed our money getting through, and donations were few and far between.

Remember, this newsletter costs you nothing, but stationary and printing costs have risen sharply.

OUT IN THE COLD!

Another problem was that the Community Office ceased to function when NED suddenly decided to do some repair work in our room without warning. This meant that as we had no alternative office all WHEELS and GRANBY TRIANGLE work ground almost to a halt and ANN IRIN and KEN FID had to work from their homes.

This is why they have both been so elusive the last few weeks! **NOT OVER YET.**

The office is open again now, but we do not know for how long as there is more repair work to be done apparently.

This time however, we hope that another room will be found for us in the building before we are thrown out of this one!! Until things are fully back to normal we will try to keep on functioning.

Apologies again for the GAZETTE delay and the closed office, but it was all beyond our control.




Figure 1—Granby Gazette, cover image, Spring 1982.

readers, writers, campaigners, and activists.²⁹ These publications thus had a distinct role in shaping the political organization of neighbors in L8 and in directing specific forms of protest against local and national authorities. Of course, the focus on introverted organization in these locales is not to say that L8 residents did not take an interest in international solidarity movements. On the contrary, throughout the 1980s, many campaigned against the apartheid and even organized the visit of the president of Namibia to the area. There remained a strong connection to the outernational as a place of hereditary origins and a continuous source of Black solidarity. The localized focus of the print culture of L8 does not, then, serve to replace an extroverted gaze with an introverted one so much as provide a space in which residents could address uniquely localized concerns.³⁰

The particular need of L8's residents for a cohesive community, and a print culture that engendered this, rested to some extent on the area's distinct history of migration and exceptionalism within the city. The Black population in Liverpool was much older than those in Britain's other "race-relation capitals," such as the neighborhoods of Handsworth, Tiger Bay, Haringey, or Moss Side. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Liverpool had grown rich from the profits of colonialism and especially from the transportation of enslaved African people to plantations across the Americas. As a port heavily invested in the British Empire, the city attracted migrants from all over the world, especially Ireland, East Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Long established in the city, Liverpool-born Blacks (to use the colloquial, self-prescribed term) had increasingly come to settle along with a sedentary white population around the Granby area in L8. By the second half of the twentieth century, many Liverpool-born Blacks were second or third generation, and many more were born out of "mixed"-ethnicity partnerships.³¹ The demographic of the area then continued to be "pluralized" by the arrival of new migrants from South Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa.³² These new arrivals were not met by the riches of empire as their forerunners had been; instead they came to a city that had gone from being one of the most important metropolises in the British Empire to a deprived backwater on the edge of the Atlantic.³³

In this context, the locale's print culture was crucial in providing a sense of inter-ethnic community between neighbors under the banner of what one local article termed the "Liverpool 8 people."³⁴ The bonds of this community were cemented

²⁹ On the role of print in networks in the absence of organizing institutions, see Agatha Beins, *Liberation in Print: Feminist Periodicals and Social Movement Identity* (Athens, GA, 2017).

³⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the relations of another Black neighborhood, Handsworth, with the outernational, see Connell, *Black Handsworth*.

³¹ On the longer history of interracial concubinage in Liverpool, see Ray Costello, *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships* (Liverpool, 2012).

³² Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, 2006), 6. See also Mark Christian, "Empowerment and Black Communities in the UK: With Special Reference to Liverpool," *Community Development Journal* 33, no. 1 (1990): 18–31.

³³ On Liverpool's political and economic decline, see John Belchem, introduction to *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism*, ed. John Belchem (Liverpool, 2006), xi–xxix. On the stigmatization of Liverpool in Britain's national media, see Butler, "Toxic Toxteth," 545. On the broader stigmatization of Liverpool in the British imagination, see Diane Frost, *Militant Liverpool: A City on the Edge* (Liverpool, 2013), 3.

³⁴ "The Brixton That Never Was," *Granby Gazette*, April/May 1981, 1–2.

further by the extreme structural and direct hostility that residents faced from much of the city. Indeed, Liverpool City Council, which only employed around 250 Black and mixed-ethnicity people out of a total workforce of 30,000 between 1980 and 1982, refused to act on the accusation that it had an issue with institutional racism.³⁵ In 1979, a radical arm of the Labour Party, Militant, came to politically dominate the council with the premise that it would lead the fight against Tory cuts. Militant opposed a focus on the plight of any one oppressed group, whether in relation to race, gender, or sexuality, lest it would, in sociologist Diane Frost's words, "undermine the working class unity they felt was needed to change society for the better."³⁶ The lack of employment opportunities, and the council's refusal to take positive action against racism, limited the life chances of people in L8 in a very clear and direct way. Liverpool's Black citizens at the beginning of the 1980s were overrepresented among the unemployed, and when they were in employment, found themselves concentrated in jobs with low pay, instability, and poor conditions.³⁷ That reality clearly reflected the council's attitude on the question of racial inequality within the city and in its own halls and offices as one that did not warrant its attention. With this stance, it economically and politically excluded the agendas of most L8 residents and set the tone for relations between them and the council as one of animosity. In the citywide context, L8 was socially isolated, culturally and ethnically distinct, and blighted by an especially acute poverty undergirded by the institutional racism of the city council and the municipality's employers.³⁸

To varying degrees, the area's print culture organized residents in rallying against the city council. The *Gazette*, for instance, which generally took a reformist stance, focused on specific problems, such as lobbying the police to stop the perceived harassment of the community and raising petitions to get "the corpy" to install public toilets, clear refuse, and carry out long-overdue repairs and maintenance of council housing. *Black Linx* magazine, produced out of a community-based education center, took a much more radical opposition to the council's racism. Referring to the council's refusal to correct the ratios of ethnic staff it employed, and in particular its refusal to employ members of the L8 community as race advisors, the magazine lamented, "[Councilor] Hatton and his cronies are determined to embark on a confrontation with the genuine forces of anti-racism in Liverpool. . . . One thing should be made clear to the Labour Party 'Militants' who threaten Black people in Liverpool with violence. *We will defend ourselves by any means necessary!* After 500 years of struggle against racism, we can assure them that we have more experience of this than the 'Johnny come lateleys' to the class struggle, the Militant Tendency."³⁹ The council's hostility toward the residents of L8, especially its Black population, was keenly felt in the neighborhood. On the one hand, articles such as this in *Black Linx* reinforced the sense of exclusion from the city, but on the other, they promoted a political fraternity between residents within the district.

³⁵ Frost, *Militant Liverpool*, 131.

³⁶ Frost, 128. See also Belchem, *Before the Windrush*, 10.

³⁷ For instance, 25 percent of "Africans" and "West Indians" were out of work, double the city average. See Ben-Tovim, *Racial Disadvantage*, 10.

³⁸ Belchem, introduction to *Merseypride*, xi; Belchem, *Before the Windrush*, 1.

³⁹ "The Labour Party's Racism and Lies," *Black Linx*, December 1984.

As the *Black Linx* article suggests, councilors' refusal to address problems of racism in the council and the city took place in the context of national battles between left-wing radicals and the British government. If L8 was seen as other to the political project of the city, at least by those in the council, Liverpool was equally perceived as pariah in the national imagination. In social and economic terms, Englishness under Thatcher's government was an especially southern project, with areas of the North being marginalized in agendas of national economic growth and political unity.⁴⁰ Black residents of L8 endured a process of double marginalization: from citywide cultural and political affinities and from joining in the national experience of many Black people. As Eddie Chambers writes, "[P]erhaps the most formidable challenge they faced was the insistent questioning of their Britishness. Born or brought up in Britain they may have been, but the message that they were not British, in any unfettered sense of the term, was telegraphed loud and clear, far and wide."⁴¹ In this context of exclusion from the city and national body politic, those living in L8 garnered a competing form of citizenship, one rooted in the informal political entity of L8. Out of a position of relative disempowerment and isolation, its diasporic citizens went about crafting a degree of community exceptionalism and political autonomy through neighborhood print.⁴²

The creation of such an L8 citizenship—that is, a shared sense of pride in and duty toward the neighborhood, among residents—relied to some extent on such a degree of transcendence across "racial" categories in the area. People who identified as being of various ethnicities rallied around the same political projects, such as resisting police harassment of Black and ethnic minority youths, and fighting the racially entrenched recalcitrance of the council toward aiding the neighborhood. In this unity, neighbors came to identify with a localized commitment to "Blackness." As Rob Waters has argued, "Blackness" was not necessarily dependent on any type of biological criteria but instead signaled a critical relation.⁴³ Heidi Mirza foreshadows Waters's argument in reflecting on being "Black" in Britain: "Located through your 'otherness,' a 'conscious coalition' emerges: a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship."⁴⁴ The majority of residents in L8 did not identify as Black in the biological sense, but most allied with or inhabited Blackness as they coalesced around a range of political objectives to do with racial justice, structural inequality, and community sovereignty.⁴⁵ Racial

⁴⁰ Phil Scraton, "Streets of Terror: Marginalization, Criminalization, and Authoritarian Renewal," *Social Justice* 31, nos. 1–2 (2004): 130–58.

⁴¹ Eddie Chambers, "The Jamaican 1970s and Its Influence on the Making of Black Britain." *Small Axe*, no. 58 (2019), 136.

⁴² On the importance of self-determination to the Black Power Movement, see Rosalind Wild, "Black Was the Colour of Our Fight": Black Power in Britain, 1955–1976" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2008), 4.

⁴³ Waters, *Thinking Black*, 4. For the L8 resident, see "This Issue Affects You!," *Black Linx*, December 1984, 4.

⁴⁴ Mirza, quoted in Nicole Jackson, "A Nigger in the New England: 'Sus,' the Brixton Riot, and Citizenship," *African and Black Diaspora* 8, no. 2 (2015): 158–170, at 160.

⁴⁵ In other multiethnic locales in the country, such as Wolverhampton, where there was a more sudden process of migration and less of a history of transcendence by the 1980s, Shirin Hirsch nevertheless finds that it was equally possible for friendships to arise "both framed by and challenging of racial divisions." See Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell*, 47.

inequalities in the context of British society meant that the label “Black” often resulted in the marginalization, subjugation, and exclusion of people of African and Asian descent. Within L8, it acted as a source of affinity between many residents, empowering them to unify against the forces of state racism. In relation to this paradox of something that could mean subjugation in one context and empowerment in another, Karen Salt reminds us that “deployed in different settings at different times, these labels may enable, as well as constrain, certain conclusions about the performance of difference—and who can be configured within its sphere.”⁴⁶ A shared Blackness aided in developing a sense of affiliation between L8 residents. It might have emphasized a difference, as Mirza argues, to the average British citizen, but within the neighborhood, it could signify L8 citizenship. Through the unifying membership of the L8 community, many non-Black neighbors partook in Black political projects such as defending the area against city and state racism and promoting antiracist politics. In this sense, there was a degree of transcendence within L8 as “Black” and “white” neighbors united against the racism of the city council, police, and nation state.

The direct and personal unification of neighbors was aided through companionships and kinships. Indeed, the majority of Black residents in the area had been born out of partnerships between Black and white parents. On a wider, communal level, that transcendence was facilitated by neighborhood printed materials.⁴⁷ For instance, socializing often took place in community centers, such as the Pakistani Centre, Somali Centre, or the Caribbean Centre, set up to anchor respective communities; seeking to break down that isolationism, the Merseyside Caribbean Council used the neighborhood press in spring 1982 to invite all residents of L8 join them for events at the Caribbean Centre. “This is not a Community Centre,” the Caribbean Council maintained, “but a center FOR THE COMMUNITY.”⁴⁸ These otherwise isolated networks within the same neighborhood worked to construct a community that was diverse in its range of ethnicities but also united by experiences of (intergenerational) migration, racial discrimination, and economic hardship and by the very act of living in the same streets or blocks of flats. For many residents, this becoming integrated was now essential to the community’s vitality. Jean Moffat, for instance, who cared for the elderly in L8, was passionate in voicing her view through the *Gazette* to the neighborhood’s readers that “nobody wins or loses in a community, at least they shouldn’t. . . . We cannot and must not let the different nationalities operate on their own in the area. This is isolation. If they have a problem then it must become our problem.”⁴⁹ Through print, a collective sense of responsibility for other L8 citizens was promoted, so that “L8” itself became a

⁴⁶ Karen Salt, *The Unfinished Revolution: Haiti, Black Sovereignty, and Power in the Atlantic World* (Liverpool, 2019), 22.

⁴⁷ On Black and white youths “co-operating” in resistance against the police, see Paul Gilroy and Errol Lawrence, “Two-Tone Britain: White and Black Youth and the Politics of Anti-racism,” in *Multi-racist Britain*, ed. Philip Cohen and Harwant Bains (Basingstoke, 1988), 121–55, at 123. On the concept of transcendence in the Black Atlantic, see William “Lez” Henry, “‘While Nuff Ah Right and Rahbit; We Write and Arrange:’ Deejay Lyricism and the Transcendental Use of the Voice in Alternative Public Spaces in the UK,” in *Memory, Migration and (De)Colonisation in the Caribbean and Beyond*, ed. Jack Webb et al. (London, 2020), 57–79, at 58.

⁴⁸ Merseyside Caribbean Council, “Merseyside Caribbean Council,” *Granby Gazette*, Spring 1982, 5.

⁴⁹ Jean Moffat, “A Letter from ‘The Groves,’” *Granby Gazette*, November/December 1981, 3.

crucial aspect of residents' identity that unified across otherwise disparate communities.

On the one hand, L8 was undergoing a process of transcendence and community construction. On the other, L8 was a place of weak state power. From this marginalized position within the British context, its residents could develop a particularly powerful position to challenge the state. Stuart Hall has written, for instance, on the unique place of certain locales in challenging colonialist (in this case, British-national) disparities of power:

[M]arginality has become a powerful space. It is a space of weak power, but it is a space of power nonetheless . . . it has something to do with the languages of the margin . . . New subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities—all hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern—have emerged and have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time. And the discourses of power in our society, the discourses of the dominant regimes, have been certainly threatened by this decentered cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local.⁵⁰

If L8 was marginalized as a place where the state had less of an economic, political, or cultural presence, a situation that often worked to the detriment of a population in need of government investment, that marginality also engendered a particularly localized response to the process. Marginality created an impetus to challenge national and citywide state apparatuses, as well as a means through which a grassroots, communal political autonomy emerged. The neighborhood's print culture offered one forum in which residents could, in Hall's words, "speak for themselves" and engender unified, localized responses to the problems of marginality, including the development of an L8 exceptionalism.

The *Granby Gazette* hosted voices of those living in the community; residents discussed the range of threats to their collective civic interests posed by the city council, the housing services, and the police. The *Gazette*—published and distributed by the Granby Community Council, situated in the heart of L8—was funded by the Liverpool City Council. This funding stream might seem to indicate that the community council was a front line of the city council, implying that it was an organization that refuted the problems of structural racism and was altogether foreign to the interests of the L8 community. Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones have argued in relation to the community-relations council set up in the wake of the Notting Hill Riots in 1958 that such an effort was based on the view of municipal and national governments that "multi-racial" areas were otherwise subject to "community failure,"⁵¹ and so in response, the state deployed community workers to foster "harmonious community relations."⁵² Schofield and Jones problematize this practice by highlighting the often competing ideals of community of state-backed community workers versus

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis, 1997), 173–87, at 183.

⁵¹ Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones, "Whatever Community Is, This Is Not It": Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of "Race" in Britain after 1958," *Journal of British Studies* 58, no. 1 (2019): 142–73, at 146.

⁵² Schofield and Jones, "Whatever Community Is, This Is Not It," 149.

“active” Black residents who perceived a degree of local autonomy from the state as crucial to the ideal of community. Since the late 1960s, the state had, indeed, pursued a policy of “multi-racialism” in that it promoted the perceived harmonious relations between various “ethnic” groups.⁵³ In line with this national initiative, the community officer and editor of the *Granby Gazette* was employed by the state with the view to create a certain vision of a cohesive, multiethnic community.

The state’s version of community, however, was not necessarily shared by L8’s community officer, Ken Pye. A white resident of L8, Pye was less concerned with forcing a vision of community on L8 than he was with using the *Granby Gazette* to empower residents by providing a venue for their thoughts. This aim positioned the *Gazette* in close alliance with the Black radical presses of L8, such as the *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin*, and in direct conflict with the state, especially the police. However, the strategies espoused by the *Gazette* were generally much more reformist than those of the *Bulletin*; they centered on petitioning, lobbying, and meeting with representatives of the state such as housing officials and the police. When the neighborhood did go into violent protest, however, Pye was quick to defend the right and the need of the residents to take up arms, placing the blame for the violence on the conduct of the city’s law enforcement. Ideologically, this placed the *Gazette* in firm opposition to the state.

The city council had little involvement in the running of the Granby Community Council; instead, much of the community council’s work was undertaken by volunteers who lived in L8. These people wrote for the *Gazette*, replied to its articles, and helped produce and deliver some six thousand copies to L8 households each month. This was not a top-down publication that deigned to enlighten residents on how they should construct their community relations: it undertook to place inhabitants in conversation with one another so they could assert the meaning of community and collectively challenge organizations such as the city council, housing organizations, and police. Residents of L8 did not formally join a movement on behalf of their community but instead became members of a more haphazardly connected network, sustained through the work of reading and writing local print culture.⁵⁴ In the first issue of the *Granby Gazette*, released in late spring 1979, the community officer went straight to the problem of organizing the locale against its material disadvantage. It urged readers to join community-based residents’ associations through which they could lobby an otherwise heedless city council to remedy poor housing conditions in the area: “JOIN YOUR GROUP AND MAKE IT STRONGER. THE MORE MEMBERS WE HAVE, THE LOUDER OUR VOICE WILL BE, AND THE MORE WE WILL BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE.”⁵⁵ Here, through the *Gazette*, Pye performed the role of expanding and bringing together residents’ associations to facilitate protest en masse.

The *Gazette* was emphatic in its attempts to bring together the people of L8 at both political and social events to unite otherwise disparate microcommunities. Its

⁵³ Felix Fuhg, “Ambivalent Relationships: London’s Youth Culture and the Making of the Multi-racial Society in the 1960s,” *Britain and the World* 11, no. 1 (2018): 4–26, at 15–16.

⁵⁴ For a similar argument of the importance of periodicals to the establishment of feminism in the United States, see Beins, *Liberation in Print*.

⁵⁵ Ken Pye, “So Far So Good,” *Granby Triangle Community Office News*, May 1979, 2. The *Granby Triangle* was renamed the *Granby Gazette* in January 1980.

personnel of local volunteers put on a range of play schemes and festivals to bring residents together, forge social relationships and build a collegial neighborhood. As the community officer for Granby noted, these events offered “an opportunity for people from different parts of Granby to work closely together on a common project.”⁵⁶ Volunteers ran karate and swimming lessons, took kids and elders to the seaside, organized film clubs, wrote reports on games of the local football team, the Granby Football Club, raised funds for individuals in need of specialist health care, and sent messages of congratulations on behalf of the “Granby community” to neighbors for personal achievements.⁵⁷ Over the summer period, events were accelerated to help parents by entertaining children out of school for the holidays. One of these events involved creating a seaside scene on one of the L8 estates, fitting it with a gigantic paddling pool, a truck-load of sand, and ponies.⁵⁸ The materials were all donated by local shops and organizations.

These community events left a strong impression on the parents of L8. Toward the end of summer of 1980, a Mrs. Williams wrote to the *Gazette* observing that “the children are having a great time, but it all must have taken a lot of work.”⁵⁹ In an impassioned response that emphasized the centrality of the commitment to the neighborhood, a *Gazette* volunteer replied, “These people would not have worked so hard if they did not believe in what they were doing or care about their estates and the people who live on them.”⁶⁰ The volunteers who organized these events strove to put into practice an ideal of community that fit with a certain type of civic pride in which residents worked across L8 to provide informal care for one another in a context of limited economic and material resources.

The vision of L8, and the construction of a cohesive community with a localized form of civic pride in which neighbors helped one another, was promoted by the *Gazette* and shared by readers and by participants from across L8. The specific ethnicity or “race” of readers like Mr. Wallace is not available, blurring the extent to which a process of transcendence was taking place. What is clear is that the *Gazette* was available to a broad spectrum of area readers, striving to bring together residents at social events and in its pages. This project of cohesion, however, was not without ideological disagreements over what shape such cohesion should take, and with it the very definition of the L8 community.

READING AND WRITING COMMUNITY TENSION IN THE GRANBY GAZETTE

L8’s print culture reflects a certain construction of a shared identity among residents. Such a sense of belonging could cut across many social and ethnic barriers. At the same time, there were clear tensions between neighbors in relation to the construction of communities within and across these publications. The *Gazette* was used

⁵⁶ Ken Pye, “Congratulations Granby!,” *Granby Gazette*, September 1979, 1.

⁵⁷ “Granby Football Club,” *Granby Gazette*, March 1980, 2; “The Paul Cain Appeal,” *Granby Gazette*, January 1980, 3; Ken Pye, “Congratulations Abdi!,” *Granby Gazette*, March 1981, 1.

⁵⁸ Ken Pye, “Sea-Side Special Day,” *Granby Gazette*, August 1980, 2.

⁵⁹ Mrs. Williams, “Festival: It’s a Hit All Round,” *Granby Gazette*, September 1980, 1.

⁶⁰ Ken Pye, “Festival: It’s a Hit All Round,” *Granby Gazette*, September 1980, 1.

regularly, for instance, by neighbors as a mouthpiece for calling out other neighbors who did not adhere to certain ideals of community care. One anonymous reader of the *Gazette* whose elderly mother lived on the Kimberley Estate wrote to complain that youths were terrorizing the estate's residents by pulling down fencing, screaming and shouting at night, and "making a toilet of the places here."⁶¹ The letter-writer requested that "the mothers" of these children stop them going up by any of the pensioners' flats. The complaint sparked local debate relating to the behavior of children, the way that they should be policed by other members of the community and, indeed, the very role and definition of "community" in L8. The response of the community officer to the letter was to castigate the people of Kimberley Estate for not sharing in attempts at community creation: "[M]ost people on the Kimberley Estate, don't really care about their own community. . . People have to realize that until they begin to care about their own community, and get involved, problems like this will increase and life will become unbearable."⁶²

This remonstrance was not only an academic meditation on how to prevent undesirable behavior but was a direct challenge through the mouthpiece of the *Gazette* to residents of the Kimberley Estate. This was a mandate being put to members of the neighborhood to comply with the effort of community construction through providing informal care for vulnerable residents, in this case the elderly, and by monitoring one another's behaviors. Estate residents responded in a stinging retort. A Mr. McCrae insisted that a shared idea of community was operating perfectly well on the estate without being presided over by their neighbors across the wider neighborhood: "[W]e do care about our old aged pensioners, and we do care about our children, they are no worse than any other children on any other estate. . . We help one another in any way we can, and we do not need you to tell us of our shortcomings (if any). We do not need you to try and place blame on the kids of [our] Closes. But we do suggest that you get your facts right."⁶³ The debate's interlocutors were clearly not at odds over what correct communal behavior should be: neighbors should take on informal duties of care toward one another, and especially the vulnerable. In the absence of state provision, and with the prevalence of deprivation, members of L8 were in agreement that a community of informal caregivers was imperative.

Disagreement pivoted more on the question of compliance. The editor of the *Gazette* joined with the initial anonymous complainant to emphasize that all neighbors should be enacting the ideal of community relations. On the other, Mr. McCrae resented the surveillance of their estate by others in L8. To call out publicly the behavior of those on the Kimberley Estate, for readers across L8 to assess, was to perform a particular mode of communal policing: the *Gazette* was here being used to highlight those not complying with community-wide expectations of neighborliness. This public shaming created a power dynamic whereby neighbors implored one another to perform the ideal of the L8 community. For Mr. McCrae, this seemed an infringement of sovereignty, as others in L8 assumed the position to police and dictate how people should act toward one another on Kimberley Estate. In this

⁶¹ "This Is Part of a Letter," *Granby Gazette*, August 1979, 3.

⁶² Ken Pyc, "This Is Part of a Letter," *Granby Gazette*, August 1979, 3.

⁶³ Mr. McCrae, "Your Letters," *Granby Gazette*, September 1979, 2. Underline in original.

regard, McCrae's argument references a related notion of community relations: that they were to be democratic, without the assumption by some residents of the right to dictate the terms of one another's behavior. In analyzing this disagreement, categories of race and class are less useful for explaining communal tensions in L8. This is a more diffuse argument between residents over what defines the L8 citizen and their role in the community at large. The *Gazette* was a key instrument here in hosting this exchange of ideas about citizenship and broadcasting them to the six thousand households across the district.

The community officer picked up on McCrae's implicit interpretation of community relations as not needing community policing by the *Gazette* and its readers. In the final response of this exchange, he reminded McCrae of his motivations in monitoring the behavior of L8's inhabitants: "If we had an active and representative group on your estate, we would stand a better chance of getting the corpy [housing corporation] to do its job."⁶⁴ In this conciliatory move by the community officer, the purpose of such "governmentality," or the policing of behavior, is to build a network of neighbors who could unite to make claims against the local authorities and protect their own material interests. If this grassroots governmentality was necessary in the eyes of some L8 residents, it was to challenge citywide political and economic inequalities, not to create disparities of power within the locale.

In L8, then, residents partook in a type of civic action. To some extent, this paralleled movements across Britain like Neighbourhood Watch. Chris Moores has described this initiative as the "ordinary" and everyday performing of Thatcherite Conservative principles of property ownership, enterprise, and wealth.⁶⁵ Such instances of community cooperation were undertaken in the context of a national effort toward achieving neoliberal ideals. The type of community surveillance and construction in L8, however, was undertaken not to bolster nationalist projects but instead to strengthen the political position of residents in fighting arms of the state. Thatcherite objectives were, as is discussed below, very much targeted as adverse to the interests of the community, with the local police often referred to as "Thatcher's Bastards."⁶⁶ The forging in L8 of a particular community in which residents provided an informal system of care for one another was not a straightforward process of unification of neighbors but involved a contest over what the structure of that community should be and who should watch over the behavior of whom. If many L8 residents did not trust the state to provide adequate welfare or to police the behavior of residents appropriately, then neighbors organized to do this themselves. In this way, a localized version of citizenship emerged in which members of the community encouraged a social conscience in their neighbors, not necessarily for the nation but for the neighborhood of L8. Such encouragement was not without a degree of coercion and tension. At certain points, this notion of citizenship became a powerful unifying force in organizing protest against external threats like police and state.

⁶⁴ Ken Pye, "Your Letters," *Granby Gazette*, September 1979, 2–3.

⁶⁵ Chris Moores, "Thatcher's Troops? Neighbourhood Watch Schemes and the Search for 'Ordinary' Thatcherism in 1980s Britain," *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (2017): 230–55, at 231. See also James L. Broun, "Place, Identity and Social Conflict in Post-Industrial England: Cases from South Lincolnshire in the 1980s," *Contemporary British History* 34, no. 3 (2020): 331–57.

⁶⁶ "David," quoted in Frost and Phillips, *Liverpool '81*, 12.

Police harassment of L8's residents was endemic, largely in the form of the police taking advantage of nineteenth-century legislation that permitted them to stop, search, and even arrest persons that they deemed to be acting "suspiciously" (hence the nickname "the SUS").⁶⁷ In practice, this law played to the discriminatory beliefs of local law enforcement who deemed that it was ethnic minorities who were to be considered as suspicious. If the views of the police were not made explicit enough through their excessive use of the SUS, they cruised up and down the heart of L8, Granby Street, shouting "N———" out of their car windows.⁶⁸ Such violence and agitation placed most of the L8 community in direct conflict with the police, if not as those stopped and searched then as a supporting, trans-ethnic network of protestors.

WRITERS TURN RIOTS: THE PRINT CULTURE OF PROTEST

The *Gazette* was quick to report and castigate police violence. Two months prior to the large-scale protests, it relayed to readers that the police had gone to the Selborne Estate to make an arrest and had beaten the suspect and members of his family.⁶⁹ They then turned on the onlookers, setting loose a police dog and riding a motorbike through the congregated neighbors. Terrorized and bloodied Selborne residents pursued a formal complaint.⁷⁰ The incident was symptomatic of the brutality meted out by area police, with Black youth as their usual target. In reporting on the brutality, the *Gazette* amplified an idea of the police as an oppressive and traumatizing force in L8 instead of a body that operated in the service of the community. Other more irregularly printed media joined the conversation. Several days before the outbreak of protest on the streets, the *Liverpool People's News: Newspaper of the Afro-Caribbean Defence Committee* ran the front-page headline "Self-Defence Is the Only Way!"⁷¹ These outlets provided their readers with a powerful counternarrative to that of the citywide and national media on the relation between law enforcement and residents in L8.

In an analysis of photojournalism on the Moss Side protests in neighboring Manchester shortly after those that took place in Liverpool, Shirin Hirsch and David Swanson argue that the city press depicted the police as "there to protect not just the property. . . but the very essence of an imaginary England against a formless mob."⁷² Alice Butler in her assessment of national media coverage of the Toxteth

⁶⁷ Jackson, "A Nigger in the New England; Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain*, 36.

⁶⁸ Witness testimony, L8LC, uncatalogued. Due to the request of the Liverpool Record Office, I have anonymized these testimonies until they are catalogued.

⁶⁹ "Alleged Assault on Selborne Estate," *Granby Gazette*, March 1981, 5.

⁷⁰ The result of this formal complaint is not known. However, it is unlikely that it resulted in disciplinary action. As in so many other claims made against the local authorities and state apparatus, including attempts to improve housing or to tackle institutional racism in the council, it likely did not have the desired outcome.

⁷¹ "Self Defence Is the Only Way!," *Liverpool People's News: Newspaper of the Afro-Caribbean Defence Committee*, 30 June 1981, 1. Unfortunately, the poor condition of the copy of this newspaper held in Liverpool Central Library makes it impossible to read more than its title.

⁷² Shirin Hirsch and David Swanson, "Photojournalism and the Moss Side Riots of 1981: Narrowly Selective Transparency," *History Workshop Journal* 89 (2020): 221–45, at 231.

protests further shows that L8 was portrayed as a “wilderness” of social and ethnic “others” who, in their battle with the police, were “brutal attackers against Britain and British values.”⁷³ In contrast, in presenting the police as the violent agitators against whom a defense needed to be mustered, L8’s local print legitimized and promoted to its readers forceful protest against the state and recast L8 residents not as a mob but as engaging in legitimate political action on behalf of the neighborhood. The *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin* reflected on the print war in explicit and explosive terms:

The media and the government are deliberately trying to make the riots of the cities in Great Britain look as if the black communities are against law and order and [that] law and order must be upheld at any cost . . . By highlighting these troubles, the media try and put across to the public that black people are responsible for the problems of this country. Hitler promoted a Nazi Germany by using the same tactics. The Liverpool 8 Defence Committee will not succumb to such media and we only hope that the community will read between the lines [of this] propaganda.⁷⁴

With this statement, the committee established the *Bulletin* to reassure the community of their intentions to offer legal aid and counter the narrative of the national media and government.

Through providing a counternarrative of the state as aggressor, local print culture portrayed L8 as an embattled neighborhood in need of defense. It was such an act of defense that sparked the infamous L8 protests. On 3 July 1981, police attempted to make an arrest around the corner from Granby Street. The youth, whose exact identity is contested, had been accused of stealing a motorbike.⁷⁵ From there a skirmish broke out between police and residents, and the violence escalated into a protracted battle across L8 over the next nine days to become the largest act of civil unrest since World War II.⁷⁶ John Belchem details that 150 buildings were destroyed, countless shops were looted (mostly by people from outside L8), and £11 million in damage was caused.⁷⁷

Such damage was by no means a reckless or mindless riot; rather, it was targeted and purposeful, coordinated to target threats to community interests, such as representatives of elitism and state violence, and to protect the residents of L8. For instance, symbols of racist oppression were dismantled, among them the statue that sat at the heart of L8 of William Huskisson, who made a fortune from transatlantic slavery. Elitist and exclusive establishments like the Racquets Club were burned down, but residents stopped outside of the Princes Park Hospital to aid in the safe evacuation of the elderly patients.⁷⁸ In the intellectual context of the area’s print

⁷³ Butler, “Toxic Toxteth,” 548.

⁷⁴ Liverpool 8 Defence Committee, “Riots Are the Voices of the Unheard,” *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee: Bulletin*, 25 September 1981, 1.

⁷⁵ For instance, Simon Peplow has identified the arrestee as Leroy Cooper. However, Cooper denied this and attested to having arrived later on at the scene, where he was subsequently arrested.

⁷⁶ Belchem, *Before the Windrush*, 252.

⁷⁷ Belchem, 252.

⁷⁸ G. S. Roberts, D. K. Banerjee, and G. L. Mills, “The Emergency Evacuation of a Geriatrics Hospital in Toxteth,” *Age and Ageing* 11, no. 4 (1982): 244–48; “Princess Park Hospital,” *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee: Bulletin*, December 1986, 5.

culture, and in the actions of the protests it becomes clear that the residents of L8 were asserting a demand for democratic communality based on providing informal care for one another and refuting state authoritarianism.

When the smoke settled, a total of 781 police officers had been injured, 258 of those hospitalized; 214 police vehicles were battered and damaged.⁷⁹ In return, the police deployed CS gas, the first instance of its use against citizens in mainland Britain. They rammed their vehicles into the crowds, resulting in the death of David Moore, whose disability prevented him from escaping the advancing Land Rover. They beat indiscriminately any L8 residents they could get hold of.⁸⁰ Unlike the statistics collected in relation to police wounded, the total number of injuries sustained by members of the L8 community is unknown. The Liverpool 8 Defence Committee set about collecting statements from victims of brutality, constructing evidence that reversed the dynamic of residents as aggressors and the police as victims.⁸¹ Like L8's print media, these statements are important documents for telling the experience of police relations from the perspective of the neighborhood residents. They make starkly apparent the breadth and depth of violence meted out against anybody, regardless of age, sex, or race, who lived in L8 and fell into police hands.⁸² The common use of the SUS laws, detailed above, to arrest with impunity anyone dwelling in L8 was again drawn on by police, in this case to enter estates and homes to beat and arrest residents. One woman reported that the police stormed her block of flats and tore through her home, demanding "black n——s and whores."⁸³ They upturned a cot with a seven-month-old baby in it, bruising the infant's eye, and bludgeoned a two-year-old child on the head with a truncheon. Such ferocity was symptomatic of police attitudes toward L8 residents, especially Black people; it points to a deeply held belief that police had the right to indiscriminately punish this community, signaling the extent to which residents more broadly, not only young Black males or those on the frontlines of the conflict, were criminalized and perceived as enemies of the state. To identify with L8 was, increasingly, to identify as an enemy of the British state and attending notions of Englishness.

If there were white people also living in this area, they were to be castigated for being, as one thirteen-year-old girl who was beaten around the head by a policeman's baton testified, "n———lovers."⁸⁴ The police assessment of L8's population as deviant for its "racial" mixing was no secret to the community. Chief Constable Kenneth Oxford of the Merseyside Police had earlier called Liverpool's Black population a bunch of "half-castes" and the "product of liaisons between black seamen and white prostitutes."⁸⁵ This definition of L8's population as born out of seedy and criminal interactions served to persecute the very notion of "inter-racial" families, and by extension L8's multiethnicism. White residents in L8 were to be admonished aggressively by the police for their perceived choice to live in the neighborhood and

⁷⁹ Belchem, *Before the Windrush*, 252.

⁸⁰ There was an inquiry into this death, but the police officers driving the car were cleared of all charges.

⁸¹ Witness testimony, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁸² Witness testimony, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁸³ Witness testimony, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁸⁴ Witness testimony, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁸⁵ Liverpool 8 Defence Committee, "Why Oxford Must Go," uncatalogued, L8LC.

to form families and friendships, indeed communities, with Black people, while championing antiracist politics. The social, cultural, and political transcendence across ethnic and “racial” groups that was integral to the construction of an L8 citizenry was criminalized by Liverpool’s law enforcement.

In print, too, the police attacked the social formations of L8. In an interview with the national newspaper the *Times*, Chief Constable Oxford beseeched parents in the area to control their children—those same children who were bloodied by the police batons. The conflict was not, he argued, a “race riot” but more a problem of Black parents being unable to control a “crowd of black hooligans intent on making life unbearable. . . if these parents are not going to pick up their responsibilities. . . then I have got to do it to protect the community at large.”⁸⁶ Oxford here attacked any locally produced systems of parenting or policing in L8. Simultaneously, he rendered meaningless the value of the social and familial relations that formed a competing L8 community to the one he vowed to protect.

The assumption by the police, state, and media that L8 was rife in criminality, whether as perceived in the disarray of the battle on the streets or in “racial mixing,” meant that the motivations of the protestors and their demands went largely ignored. As Alice Butler has illustrated, news articles printed in broadsheets and tabloids across the national political spectrum consistently neglected to interview L8 residents about their motivations for protest and instead constructed their own explanations for events.⁸⁷ The silencing of L8’s community allowed the representation of the area as a place of alterity. Rather than attempting to understand the protestors on their own terms, the media represented the community as consisting of people who worked against the interests of the British nation and indeed were attempting to attack and unravel the revered British institution of law and order.

Even the term *riot* touted by the media suggests a people in disorder and chaos with no discernible political agenda.⁸⁸ In deploying that terminology, the media partook in a British-imperial tradition of representing challenges to British governmental power by colonial subjects as devoid of intellectual or ideological objectives. Clinton Hutton details the habit of the nineteenth-century British press of referring to “rebellions” in the colonies rather than presenting the conflicts as “wars.”⁸⁹ Doing so, Hutton explains, aided colonial authorities in erasing the political significance of the conflict, and with it the notion that practices of imperialism could incite legitimate political, moral, or ideological objections. Equally, the perceived foreign population of L8 was represented in national and city presses as presenting no legitimate political challenge to the actions of British state apparatus, only violent opposition to

⁸⁶ Staff reporters, “Chief Constable Puts Blame on Parents,” *Times* (London), 6 July 1981; Ronald Kershaw, “Police Chief Condemns Parents of Rioters,” *Times* (London), 8 July 1981.

⁸⁷ Butler, “Toxic Toxteth,” 541.

⁸⁸ On British-domestic representations of riots and rioters, see Daniel Renshaw, “The Violent Frontline: Space, Ethnicity, and Confronting the State in Edwardian Spitalfields and 1980s Brixton,” *Contemporary British History* 32, no. 2 (2018): 231–52.

⁸⁹ Clinton Hutton, “The Press and the Morant Bay Rebellion,” presentation at “Terror Spread: The Morant Bay Rebellion and Jamaican History,” University of West Indies at Mona, 23 October 2015. See also Hutton, *Colour for Colour, Skin for Skin: Marching with the Ancestors into War Oh at Morant Bay* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2015), xiii–xiv. For a corroborating view, see Biswamoy Pati, introduction to *The Great Rebellion of 1857 in India: Exploring Transgressions, Contests, and Diversities*, ed. Biswamoy Pati (London, 2010), 1–15, at 1.

the values of the British nation. L8's print infrastructure had been deployed by residents to justify violent protest against the state and the effects of racial and economic inequalities; in the aftermath of the battle, it was used to wage a print war against the government and the national media. The ensuing strategies for challenging the media and the state that were proffered by the locale's various newsletters did not, however, entirely align. They instead illustrated a range of ideological positions on offer to the L8's residents in the community's supposed relationship with the state.

THE LETTER AND THE LAW: DIVERGING STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE ACROSS L8'S PRINT CULTURE

The battle in L8 did not resolve animosities between the state, police, and residents. The L8 Defence Committee pressed on in its creation of an alternative public sphere in the neighborhood through publication of its *Bulletin*. When the city council and media dubbed the residents "gangsters" organized for "criminal reasons,"⁹⁰ the committee argued that violent protest was a defensive measure against police violence and harassment. To this end, the committee used the *Bulletin* to galvanize the community around campaigns to improve the policing of the community, especially through removing Chief Constable Kenneth Oxford. The chief constable had ordered officers to use CS gas against belligerents, a move the committee saw as further evidence that the police regarded "black people as sub-human."⁹¹ Two weeks after the conflict, on the evening of the day of a protest march calling for Oxford's expulsion, the committee released a statement to the press that publicized what many of the protesters would have been discussing as they marched into the Liverpool city center: "[T]he police have never listened to the voice of the community. . . and no dialogue can ever take place between themselves and Oxford who has for many years headed a police force which has harassed the community."⁹² The committee saw Oxford as directly responsible for the violence that residents suffered at police hands. But more than this, as the committee informed the readers of L8, Oxford headed up an organization that refused to listen to residents' views. In this way, the committee asserted, the chief constable denied the residents their civil rights of access to policing by consent. The Oxford's removal, it was hoped, would decrease police harassment and provide the residents with an increased degree of agency over the policing of L8.⁹³

The *Gazette* joined the L8 Defence Committee in admonishing police for the violence and agreed that residents taking up arms was a necessary recourse. There was, undoubtedly, an alliance between the committee and the editors of the *Gazette* at the community office. Ken Pye printed proclamations by the committee that sought to correct misrepresentations of the group that appeared in the media.⁹⁴ The *Gazette*

⁹⁰ On the accusations by the media, see "Riots Are the Voices of the Unheard," *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee: Bulletin*, 25 September 1981. On the council, see "The Struggle for Justice in the City," *Black Linx*, December 1984, 3.

⁹¹ "The Use of CS Gas," *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee: Bulletin*, 25 September 1981.

⁹² Liverpool 8 Defence Committee, "Press Statement," 15 August 1981, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁹³ "Campaign to Get Rid of Oxford," *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee: Bulletin*, no. 2, n.d., 1.

⁹⁴ Ken Pye, "The Liverpool 8 Defence Committee," *Granby Gazette*, 22 September 1981.

and the committee also worked together to organize transport to and from the police station where arrested residents were being kept, so that family and friends could visit, demonstrate, and offer legal advice. The ensuing strategy of the *Gazette* in relation to the police did, though, diverge significantly from that of the defense committee. The *Gazette* argued, in much the same way as had the committee, that the very nature of policing in L8 needed to undergo a process of radical readjustment and that at the heart of this shift should be the voice of the L8 residents. Yet in an article giving notice of a meeting between community groups and the police, the *Gazette* was at pains to bring the force of the community to bear on the police and compelled residents to enter into dialogue: “Obviously the MOST important thing . . . is that all community groups invited to attend the meeting ACTUALLY DO ATTEND . . . If people do not like what the police are saying then the place to say it is AT the meeting.”⁹⁵ This statement diverged from the tactics of the L8 Defence Committee, who had refused to meet with the police whom they accused of repeatedly ignoring their concerns and advice. Whereas the community office advocated a reformist dialogue and conciliation, the L8 Defence Committee harked to a Black Power tradition of autonomy from the oppression of law enforcement.

The neighbors who formed the committee were fighting for a very specific objective: they were there to defend “the people in our community who are the victims of the police oppression and open to the racism of the courts; to collect statements, and arrange legal help.”⁹⁶ In other words, despite its rejection of the authority of the police and despite accusations of illicit and illegal behavior from the press and the council, the committee was in fact trying to harness the legal system to work for the residents of L8. The emergence of this group reflects not a change in ambition from many of the L8 residents who took to violence against state systems but an evolution of strategy; the L8 Defence Committee was organizing to protect the residents from the police and the legal system by intervening in that system through the practice of law. In this sense, the committee and its *Bulletin* provided the voices of many of the protestors, illustrating the extent to which the violence was not only anti-police or antiracist in its aims but also was concerned with attempts to create a desirable version of law and order in the neighborhood: one in which the police would be held to account by the neighborhood’s citizens.

Certain members of the L8 Defence Committee—Solly Bassey, Maria O’Reilly, and Dave Clay, all Black residents of L8—duly worked to put this vision into effect by establishing the L8 Law Centre. Staff at the center went about observing and checking police behavior in the area, providing legal advice and aid to L8 residents who had been subject to police harassment or wrongful arrest or had otherwise suffered at the hands of the law. In a pamphlet announcing the opening of the center to the neighborhood, the committee explained the liberatory potential of the legal system: “The law can either be an instrument for oppression or a means to liberation . . . We believe that a vital function of the Centre’s work will be to ‘de-mystify’ the law and to present the law as a means to liberation – a way in which the powerless can fulfil their legitimate aspirations and defend their rights.”⁹⁷ Through intervening

⁹⁵ “On the Right Track?,” *Granby Gazette*, November/December 1981, 1.

⁹⁶ “We Have Never Claimed to Be the Voice of the Community,” *Liverpool 8 Defence Committee Bulletin*, no. 1, 25 September 1981.

⁹⁷ Liverpool 8 Law Centre, “Liverpool 8 Law Centre,” pamphlet, uncatalogued, L8LC.



Figure 2—“He Does the Right Thing Yo!,” L8 Law Centre Collection, Record Office, Liverpool Central Library.

in the way that the law was administered in L8 through the police and the courts, the Law Centre restored a degree of sovereignty to those residing in the community. The center not only worked to protect residents from the police but also articulated a set

of desires in the community for how behavior in the neighborhood should be policed. In this sense, residents were assuming a degree of control over the method of governmentality in L8. The aim of this center was not, then, to refute policing altogether but to grant agency to residents in the processes of policing and to implement the “improvement of police/community relations.”⁹⁸ These efforts to empower residents in their relationship with authorities reflect a complicated yoking together of the strategies of the *Defence Committee Bulletin* and the *Gazette*. The center did not necessarily aim to enter into dialogue with the police, but it certainly sought to reform policing by holding officers to account for their actions.

The Law Centre, like the Defence Committee, disseminated ephemeral publications encouraging L8’s citizens to be vigilant in watching over the behavior of the police. If the committee railed against police strategy and its commander-in-chief in the *Bulletin*, the center produced material that would help residents who fell victim to police brutality. The center was particularly keen to educate the neighborhoods’ youth; its illustrated pamphlets catered to a set of younger readers who otherwise might not have been drawn to the political discussions that were entertained in the pages of the *Bulletin*. A cartoon strip, for instance, produced by the Law Centre, introduced young people to the character of Jake, ten years old when he is arrested by police (see [figure 2](#)).⁹⁹ Luckily, Jake remembers the advice of the Law Centre and “does the right thing yo!” The scenario in the cartoon reflects community fears of children being exposed to police brutality. Upon arrest, Jake begins to cry in response to the policeman’s aggressive handling. He “does the right thing” by giving his name and address and saying nothing else, remembering the policeman’s identification number, and waiting for his mother to turn up at the station. She also “does the right thing” by phoning the Law Centre to ask for the help of their solicitor, “Ms Make It Right,” who is able to make a formal complaint against the officers as Jake has remembered their IDs. The battle for policing by consent thus took place across the print cultures and attending readerships of L8. The Law Centre and neighborhood parents clearly felt it was necessary not only to fight for a change in policing techniques but also to galvanize their children, some as young as ten, in the effort to monitor police behavior so that it could be controlled. The neighborhood’s print culture helped train the area’s citizens of all age groups in the production of a community that held to account the behavior of its police force. In this way, the community restored a degree of agency over the process of policing in L8 and instilled certain expectations of law and order in the youth.

CONCLUSION

Racism, protest, and so-called riots took place across Britain in the early 1980s, illustrating undeniably a connection between the neighborhoods of the diaspora. This singular uniformity does not mean, though, that we should perceive in all these protests the same set of agenda and concerns. As the diaspora devolved over decades,

⁹⁸ Liverpool 8 Law Centre, “Liverpool 8 Law Centre,” pamphlet, uncatalogued, L8LC.

⁹⁹ Liverpool 8 Law Centre, “Jake Gets Stopped by the Police: He Does the Right Thing,” pamphlet, uncatalogued, L8LC.

Black migrants grappled with the respective social and political landscapes of the local to build distinctive cultural and political communities. Through getting to grips with the particularities of the demographics and political contexts of these locales, historians are able to push toward a more nuanced, diverse understanding of Black British history. Such a bottom-up approach suggests that a host of political communities across Britain addressed problems of racial inequality through distinct, local vernacular. The connections between these localities needs to be worked through with particular attention to the diversity of writings by those who forged such connections, in order to understand the grassroots politics of Black Britishness.

The specific articulations and manifestations of protest in the area were contingent upon discussions hosted in L8's print culture. Here the problems posed were intellectualized and discussed so that a collective response, or, indeed, an ambivalent one, emerged. It was the everyday assault on Black lives that demanded the grassroots form of protest found at the level of locality. The print culture of L8 aided in the creation of a particular public sphere that was concerned with tackling the day-to-day effects of racism and deprivation. It encouraged and facilitated neighbors' creation of networks of informal care in the context of scarcity and promoted the performance of citizenship and civic pride for the benefit of the neighborhood. These campaigns aided in creating a shared sense of L8 as being a crucial component of identity across neighbors in the district. In its newsletters and bulletins, neighbors debated and promoted versions of an L8 citizenship and derided those who violated their expectations. The growth of this grassroots governmentality, and attending citizenship, contributed to the strengthening of an L8 community sovereignty in which residents rejected the authority and hierarchy of the state and, crucially, set about creating an alternative, communal, and exceptional political order.