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Grassroot responses from the Black community towards the race riots of the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on the topic of race relations and rioting is consumed by state narratives and those of elites as opposed to uncovering the voices of Black people who have endured, lived through and shaped their culture and lives around these concepts. This article builds upon existing work on race relations, providing agency to the Black community to articulate their rightful lived experiences, emotions and perceptions of the riots and issues of race relations during the 1980s. Grassroot experiences of the Black community will be compared to academic outputs relating to race relations and rioting regarding how such responses were captured in official policy, reports and secondary literature. The following research questions were addressed: What was the cause of the race riots in the 1980s? What were the subsequent reactions? What methods of resistance were utilised by the Black community? What was the impact of government officials and policies in response to the race riots? Contrary to popular sentiments, the events of the 1980s were not due to the innate criminality and delinquent culture of Black people, rather, humane reactions towards the poverty and criminalisation afforded to Black people by the state in which they were retaliating and responding in solidarity against.

By including the academic works of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy this article incorporates emerging narratives which reiterate the aforementioned points. Through incorporating the cultural output of Linton Kwesi Johnson, John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah a realistic presentation is offered of the experiences of criminalisation and racialisation endured by Black men, their recollections and their views on reforms.

Introduction

Hall et al. (2013a, p. 390) suggested that Britain in the 1980s was characterised by authoritarian governance under Prime Minister Thatcher, industrial disputes and mass youth unemployment, alongside increasing anti-immigration resentment in cities such as Brixton, Bristol and Handsworth. Keith (1993, p. 52) argued that the era of the 1980s was marked by civil unrest in Bristol, drawing national attention towards the burning, looting and violence, followed by the Brixton riots a year later with many more to follow within the decade (Keith, 1993, p. 52). He demonstrates how Prime Minister Thatcher's response and that of officials orientated around values, wherein the rioters were depicted as delinquents, lacking self-discipline and correct parenting (Keith, 1993, p. 61). This was reinforced

by Clarke and Williams (2018, p. 238) and Paul (1997, p. 4) regarding the direction of the Prime Minister's response being heavily influenced by the race of the rioters, with such remarks being unlikely if the rioters were white.

Gilroy (2002) and Paul (1997), alongside many other academics, claim that race is a taboo subject which is inadequately confronted within British academia, often due to Britain's constrained history of slavery, empire and fascism, overlooking such institutional racism rather than acknowledging and rectifying these practices. Existing works regarding race relations, specifically the race riots during the 1980s, often reflect the views of Thatcher's Britain in speaking for and on behalf of the Black community. This belittled their experiences with minimal consideration offered to enable Black people to express the barriers they experienced in gaining recognition for their citizenship, equality of opportunity and freedom from the constraints of police suspicion. The 'Sus' law, commonly understood in the Black community, allowed officers to stop and search them purely on the basis of looking 'suspicious'. Additionally, Hall et al. (2013a, p. 46) illustrate how some policemen were heavily influenced by the social prejudices against Black people, which contributed to poor race relations between the police and the Black community. Perry (2015, p. 246) posits that the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 provoked the state to officially define and acknowledge its institutional racism, with progress ongoing regarding the robust rectification of these practices.

This article builds upon existing works on race relations, providing agency to the Black community to articulate and explain their rightful lived experiences, emotions, perceptions of the riots and issues of race relations during the 1980s. Grassroot experiences of the Black community are compared to the academic output and political ideas relating to race relations and rioting. In particular, this relates to how such responses were captured in official policy, reports and secondary literature. This provides a human orientated perspective of race relations and the riots across the 1980s compared to the criminal connotations of the Black community as rioters.

Research questions

The following research questions formed the basis of this research:

- What was the cause of the race riots in the 1980s?
- What were the subsequent reactions?
- What methods of resistance were utilised by the Black community?
- What was the impact of government officials and policies in response to the race riots.

Furthermore, this article discusses the cultural and political legacy of these events within the Black community.

Methodology

To capture the diversity and complexity of experience within the Black community, this research drew upon a variety of sources, across interdisciplinary fields, such as culture, sociology and politics (Gilroy & Hall, 2011, p. 11). Stuart Hall, a prominent academic in Black history and race relations of Jamaican descent, is discussed. His methodology of agency towards the Black community in their lived experiences of racialisation, their claims and ambitions in Britain during the post-war era, and their struggle for freedom, justice and citizenship is analysed (Perry, 2015, p. 247).

Alongside this, Paul Gilroy, a cultural theorist in the field of Black studies, opts for a multidisciplinary approach within the study of race relations and the global experience of the Black community relating to politics and history (Gilroy, 2002, pp. 20–3), More specifically, the necessity of acknowledging Britain's intertwined nationalism and racist sentiments within studies of race relations (Gilroy, 2002, pp. 20–3).

The aforementioned theorists' work is used in the reviewing of secondary literature on the 1980s race riots which are then compared to official documents and reports produced during this period. This will be contextualised regarding the depictions of the Black community within this. Further, whether this correlates to their lived experiences shared in accounts, largely through the medium of poetry from Black people living through this period. In doing so, this will provide agency to the experiences of the Black community.

Gilroy (as cited in du Gay & Hall, 2011, pp. 118–19) describes Black music as providing a unique insight into the emotions and experiences of the authors, capturing the unity of theory, politics and folk knowledge. This article utilises music as a form of agency that highlights the experiences and emotions of Black people during the 1980s.

Selected poems from Linton Kwesi Johnson, John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah are also analysed. The analysis of selected poems enabled an exploration of similarities and differences within their experiences, contextualised within wider discourses relating to Black people's experiences in response to the riots of the 1980s. All three poets are of Caribbean descent, of different ages and from different regions in Britain, thus, they offer diverse perspectives about their experiences during the 1980s (British Council, 2022; The Poetry Archive; Zephaniah, 2018).

Archival research

The archives visited during the search for primary documents are the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, and Heritage Quay, University of Huddersfield. Primary documents from the West Yorkshire Archives are inclusive of South Asian communities, different religions alongside those specifically documenting the experiences of Black people. Thus, they provided a wide range of documentary evidence about issues of race affecting different minority groups in the 1980s.

The primary documents included in this research comprised public opinions in newspaper cuttings and headlines, surveys, official views collected through the Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act of 1984 and the Scarman report produced in direct response to the 1981 Brixton riot (Ozin & Norton, 2015; West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford). These primary sources are analysed in conjunction with the selected poems of Johnson, Agard and Zephaniah. Zephaniah's autobiography is also drawn upon as it provides a more personal, rich account of Black people's experiences during the 1980s.

Life during the 1980s

Hall et al. (2013b) describe how World War II (WWII) was among the major periods, after slavery, when the 'west' encountered a large Black presence within Britain due to post-war migration. Post-war migration from former colonies to some extent, and elsewhere was welcomed in Britain due to labour shortages, with estimates of over a million vacancies within the workforce after the war (Searle, 2013, p. 45).

In opposition to popular sentiments regarding Black people's presence in Britain only happening after WWII, Jackson (2015, p. 160) posits that Black people have historically been rooted in Britain prior to the nineteenth century, but due to their limited numbers and lack of identification within official statistics they were not considered until the 1950s and 1960s when such settlement increased. Perry (2015, p. 27) argues that the majority of migrants after 1945 of African descent originated from the Caribbean, most notably Jamaica. Perry explains how this was a result of the lack of employment opportunities within the West Indies due to decolonisation and consequent economic destabilisation, prompting them to seek job opportunities in Britain in the 1940s (Perry, 2015, p. 27).

More specifically, Farrall et al. (2017, pp. 220–2) states that Prime Minister Thatcher's government

was characterised by the 'rolling back' of the post-WWII welfare state, constraining its support towards the social and economic livelihood of many working-class communities, thus increasing the socio-economic and health inequalities during this period. Asserting further that the Prime Minister's policies towards race relations were a continuation from her predecessors, wherein non-white immigration levels were kept to a minimum, in the attempt to preserve the delusional racial harmony which was thought to be present in Britain (Shaw, 2017, p. 117).

To supress migration, Fryer & Gilroy (2010, p. 10) stated that numerous Nationality Acts were created to determine those deserving of British citizenship and 'others' whose discrimination resulted in harassment, second-class citizenship and at times deportation. Maguire (2019, p. 432) and Clarke and Williams (2018, p. 235) acutely characterise this as the colonial racist perceptions of the Black community remaining within public attitudes, wherein Black people were perceived as dangerous, a threat to white society and an inferior race of people. The 1948 British Nationality Act granted citizenship status to some colonies wherein they became either British subjects or Commonwealth citizens (Brooke, 2014, p. 25; Brooker, 2010, p. 145; Jackson, 2015, p. 168). However, after the riots of 1981, the British Nationality Act 1981 increased the difficulty with which colonial migrants could claim citizenship while removing the right of children born in Britain to claim citizenship (Brooke, 2014, p. 25; Brooker, 2010, p. 145; Jackson, 2015, p. 168). Hall et al. (2013 p. 226) argue that the primary targets of which were Black people and South Asian migrants who were perceived as intruders, restricting these forms of immigration to purify Britain through white migrants from Europe and the Commonwealth.

Jackson (2015, p. 159) demonstrates how Black people were criminalised further through the 'Sus' law – the colloquial term referring to Section IV of the Vagrancy Act 1824 which re-emerged in the 1970s. This allowed police officers to arrest anyone who appeared 'suspicious', the primary targets of which were Black people (Jackson, 2015, p. 159). Stratton and Zuberi (2016, p. 109) explain how Black people in the 1980s were perceived to be foreigners with permission to remain and violent criminals who were threatening the jobs of white people. Keith (1993, p. 11) suggests that the culmination of this resulted in the overpolicing of the Black community, which severely damaged race relations between Black people and the police, a prominent factor of the 1981 riots.

Hall et al. (2013a, p. 187) demonstrate how these attitudes were rooted within the institutional racism of Britain in reproducing discriminatory attitudes towards the 'other', wherein migrants were stereotyped as criminals (Hall et al, 2013a, p. 187; Williams, 2015, pp. 18–21). Maguire (2019, p. 432) illustrates how Black men were depicted as sexually deviant and dangerous to white society, specifically white women who needed protecting from them.

Weiner (2018, p. 173) claims that the 1980s altered the course of race rioting in Britain, with second-generation Black communities refusing to be subservient to the criminalisation and racialisation tolerated by their parents, exemplified by the St Pauls riot in Bristol in the 1980s. Bowling (1999, p. 2) explains how the Brixton riot of 1981 is commonly recalled as the onset of race rioting in the 1980s, described by the Home Secretary as the most significant case of rioting in mainland Britain in the century. Jackson (2015, p. 159), however, posits that the most significant factor that contributed to the riots was related to the 'Sus' law and police brutality towards the Black community.

In 1985, there was a re-emergence of rioting in Brixton, due to police brutality during the raid on Cynthia Jarrett's home in Broadwater, Tottenham, which resulted in her death (Akala, 2018, p. 4). Additionally, a few days earlier, paralysis was caused to Cherry Groce when she was shot by police during a raid on her home (Akala, 2018, p. 4). Bowling (1999, p. 2) illustrates that numerous riots took place across the United Kingdom (UK) within areas populated by African-Caribbean communities

such as Birmingham and Leeds. However, due to media prominence and concern regarding Brixton, the latter is dominant in the public's collective memory (Bowling, 1999, p. 2).

Jackson (2015, p. 167) claims that the government responded to the riots through the restricted inquiry by Lord Scarman who refused to define institutional racism alongside his marginalisation of migrant parents. He demonstrates how Scarman blamed the disorders upon the delinquent culture of Black people (Jackson, 2015, p. 167). This was in complete contrast to the harassment and criminalisation endured by the Black community which was exacerbated further by the economic depression during the 1980s (Jackson, 2015, p. 167). Ozin and Norton. (2015, p. 2) suggest that the PACE Act of 1984 responded to the racial stop and search motivations of the police in limiting and restricting them. Nevertheless, riots still occurred a year later, and the continued racialised elements of stop and search are present within society today.

Theoretical framework

Stuart Hall, a prominent academic in Black history and race relations is discussed. Specifically, his methodology of agency towards the Black community in their lived experiences of racialisation and their struggle for freedom, justice and citizenship (Perry, 2015, p. 247). The work of Paul Gilroy, a cultural theorist in the field of Black studies who uses a multidisciplinary approach within the study of race relations and the global experience of Black people regarding politics and history is also included. This includes the importance of acknowledging Britain's intertwined nationalism and racist sentiments within such studies (Gilroy, 2002, pp. xx–xxiii).

Hall's works reiterated the dominant theme in the 1970s and 1980s of a 'crisis' within the sphere of politics, economics and society, echoed by mainstream Thatcherite narratives of neo-liberalism and race (Brooke, 2014, p. 21). His work on law and order demonstrated Thatcherism's manipulation of this moral concept in her reproaching of minority ethnic groups, specifically Black people (Brooker, 2010, pp. 11–15). Brooker (2010, pp. 11–15) claims that the Prime Minister viewed the 1981 Brixton riots as a consequence of a lack of discipline and authority in the lives of Black people as opposed to wider societal factors, including race relations, which heavily contributed to this.

Hall et al.'s (2013b, p. 2) work *Representation* theorises this notion wherein meanings associated with different concepts and people are achieved through the language and discourses used to refer to them. The arguments presented include Black people, being represented as 'other' with opposing moral binary extremes of good and bad, creating simultaneous fear and intrigue (Hall et al, 2013b, p. 219). He demonstrates how this is more notable with the use of the term 'foreigner' and its association with immigrants in the 1980s (Hall et al, 2013b, p. 226). The connotations of which results in uniting mainstream society, fearing their purity would be tainted by the presence of such foreigners (Hall et al, 2013b, p. 226). Fryer and Gilroy (2010, p. 382) argue that the Nationality Acts of the 1980s essentially treated Black people as second-class citizens wherein, ironically, they were asked for complete loyalty towards Britain (Fryer & Gilroy, 2010, p. 382). According to Hall et al. (2013b, p. 226) this process utilised both conscious and unconscious means to expel Black people and other ethnic minorities from dominant narratives and inclusion in British society.

Similarly, Williams claims (2015, pp. 18–21) that the predominant application of such 'othering' was through the concept of criminalisation. This was reinforced by racist notions wherein police perceived a Black face to equate to illegal immigrants and criminals, and thus undeserving of humane treatment (West Yorkshire Archive Service, WYB644/1/2/2). Hall et al. (2013a, p. 46) illustrate how multiple official figures enforced this 'othering' through the 'Sus' law, abusing it by disproportionately directing its use to the stop and search of Black men in the 1980s. Thus, demonstrating how police were not removed from

the social prejudices prevalent within society, rather tools used to consolidate this (Hall et al., 2013a, p. 46). Consequently, many young Black men were stopped as suspects of mugging, and the directing of police patrols within Black community areas, based upon the expectation of their disorderly nature and innate criminality, increased (Hall et al., 2013a, pp. 39 & 48). Further, the disproportionate levels of Black men convicted and stopped for street robbery was utilised to create a moral attack on Black people under the guise of crime, to objectify and further control their bodies (Clarke & Williams, 2018, pp. 235–8).

Despite being criminalised based on racialisation, Black people utilised popular culture as a space to represent their lived experiences (Hall, 1993, p. 109). This took many forms, mainly through the medium of music, using vernacular dialects within music to create and restore the complexities of their identities of their simultaneous blackness and British citizenship (Hall, 1993, pp. 109–11).

Gilroy opts for an interdisciplinary approach which is reflective of the diversity of experience of Black people (Gilroy, 2002). He refers to Black culture as globalised, referring to the transatlantic slave trade in which culture as well as commodities were exchanged, and thus broadening the scope of Black culture within global spheres (People Pill).

Gilroy's work directs individuals to recognise the unity within which nationalist and racist rhetoric are combined (Dudrah, 2021, p. 155; Gilroy, 2002, p. xiii). His work on the cultural inclusion of Black people in Britain provides an indication of the use of new racist rhetoric relating to inclusion and exclusion (Gilroy, 2002). Notably, Black people were deemed to be a 'bastard' people who did not belong to Britain despite their colonial relationship, rather a threat to the nation against which they could unite (Gilroy, 2002, pp. 45 & 49). Due to this exclusion and racism, the riots of 1981 were presented as antisocial traditions of people who were not accepted as British (Gilroy, 2002, p. 178).

Gilroy (2002, p. 178) explains how reports of such events were racialised as Black rebellions alongside popular memory of rioting being dominated by Caribbean men in unemployed neighbourhoods of London rather than the national outbreak of rioting which occurred during the 1980s. Gilroy's work is reinforced by reports during the time, about racism being rampant in society, and thus providing differing narratives away from popular memory and academia (West Yorkshire Archive Service, WYB644/1/2/2). Bourne (2013, p. 88) claims that Black people were targeted as a symbolic group upon whom the fears of white society would be directed. The real issue with Britain was the crisis of identity experienced in post-war Britain due to the collapse of empire and decline in economic dominance alongside the visible change in the social demographic of Britain due to colonial migration.

According to Gilroy (1990, as cited in du Gay & Hall, 2011, pp. 111 & 117), Black popular culture provides a political medium to express the ideals, experiences and struggle of Black people. du Gay and Hall (2011, p. 118) assert that Gilroy gives due regard to the specific medium of Black music, its combination of theoretical and political rhetoric through the dialect of folk music, presenting a solidarity of experience and struggle in the face of their discrimination and criminalisation.

du Gay and Hall (2011, pp. 123–4) illustrate how music removes barriers when capturing the global struggle of Black people, wherein their identity is constructed around and in opposition to the racial oppression experienced within the sphere of politics, economy and society (du Gay & Hall, 2011, pp. 123–4). This contrasts with reports in which racial discrimination was deemed to be a social issue rather than something which occurs within economic infrastructure, politics and is institutionalised within the nation's political tradition (West Yorkshire Archive Service, WYB644/1/2/2).

Consequently, primary sources obtained from the archive have little similarity with the works of Hall and Gilroy other than the obvious mention of police

harassment, criminalisation and racism (West Yorkshire Archive Service). This is in opposition to the specific need for agency and longitudinal studies of Black presence and experiences of police harassment and racialisation in the 1980s which Hall and Gilroy opt for.

Contrary to Hall's and Gilroy's position on race and rioting, as discussed, Brooker (2010, p. 2) argues that mainstream academia and historiography about the 1980s riots focuses on the dominance of Thatcher and the Conservative party due to their governance within the decade.

However, racism in Britain was already in existence prior to the formation of the Conservative and Labour party as we know them today. Rather, racism was deeply institutionalised within the sphere of politics, across both political parties in Britain. Furthermore, racism and the criminalisation of Black people is not solely confined to the Conservative tradition; similar sentiments are shared in the Labour party's politics because of the party's conflation of class struggle with racism (Fryer & Gilroy, 2010; El-Enany, 2020). Therefore, it is incumbent that researchers provide a historical narrative of the racialisation and criminalisation of Black people across both political traditions.

Weiner (2018) explains how the 1980s riots were not individual reactions towards the policies of Conservatism and Thatcher. Instead, they were a culmination of responses to ongoing oppression and criminalisation inherited from their ancestors in the colonies and those experienced first-hand in their daily lives through a lack of access to jobs, policing of their bodies and their exclusion from British society (Weiner, 2018, p. 173). However, as Panayi (2014, p. 86) demonstrates, the form of rioting that occurred after the prominent Brixton riot of 1981 was a specific response to Thatcher's policies regarding ethnic minorities. Panayi (2014, p. 86) and Weiner (2018, p. 173) suggest that the Prime Minister's party rhetoric on nationality and citizenship provoked and undermined the status of ethnic minorities in Britain. Black people, in particular, were unwilling to continue to accept the subjugation, deprivation and oppression endured by the first generation of migrants (Panayi, 2014, p. 86; Weiner, 2018, p. 173).

Keith (1993, p. 2) describes how Black criminalisation and innate prejudices about Black people's disposition to crime is often cited within explanations of crime rates in the 1980s. Rather, Farrall et al. (2017, p. 235) demonstrate how these explanations could be more correctly explained by relating it to the economic depression of the 1980s. The institutional racism prevalent within the police force may also provide a realistic and logical explanation of the disproportionate levels of Black people convicted of crime (Farrall et al, 2017, p. 235). Furthermore, Keith (1993, p. 2) explains how such criminalisation increased rapidly after the 1981 riots, establishing the norm with which Black people and their communities were criminalised and stigmatised in media and policy rhetoric. Williams (2015, p. 22) illustrates how the stereotypical label used for Black people of the 'folk devil' transformed from the 'mugger' of the 1970s to 'rioters' in the 1980s may have contributed to this. Research on the riots appears to fail to capture this.

Keith (1993, p. 53) discusses how the events that occurred in the 1980s cannot be represented within a single umbrella term of a 'race' riot, as many viewed them as youth riots. For some they represented a continuity of the Black African revolts in the 1960s and for others as a specific response to the specific conditions present during the 1980s (Keith, 1993, p. 52). Additionally, the riots were a culmination of racism, policing of Black people alongside the deprivation they experienced prior to the 1980s which was exacerbated further by the economic depression of the 1980s (Keith, 1993, p. 53).

Parallels cannot be broadly applied to the riots that occurred in America in the 1960s. This is because these riots took place against a different economic background. Black people in the UK were suffering disproportionately from the economic depression of the 1980s and this contributed, markedly, to the outburst of violence within Britain across the

decade (Keith, 1993, p. 84). Gilroy (2002, p. 325) illustrates that Thatcher's rhetoric regarding the rioters' lack of self-discipline and morality distorts the actual motives with which individuals acted in response to the riots. Many people responded in solidarity with their communities in the face of police harassment and criminalisation (Gilroy, 2002, p. 325). This was in opposition to public images and narratives of individual actors as looters and deviant Black people damaging the nation's infrastructure and tarnishing its law and order (Gilroy, 2002, p. 325). Consequently, Keith (1993, pp. 208–10) suggests that rioting does not occur within an empty sphere, rather it is a culmination of social, political and economic factors as was experienced by the Black community prior to the 1980s.

Analysis of select cultural output from Johnson and Agard

Faisal Devji demonstrates the global reach of music, its appeal of ambiguity and transformational meaning through traditional forms, while facilitating multiple readings and connotations which engage with the writer's inheritance and lived experiences (Iqbal Falsafi, 2013). Furthermore, Gilroy describes Black music as providing a unique insight into the emotions and experiences of authors in capturing the unity of theory, politics and folk knowledge (du Gay & Hall, 2011, pp. 118–19).

Pan-Africanism as an ideology is prevalent within Agard's cultural output. A brief discussion follows which will then be applied to Agard's work. Pan-Africanism is an ambiguous term with little consensus on the exact definition; however, Taye (2021, pp. 31 & 34) generally defines it as enabling African people's freedom; to realise and achieve political independence and freedom during the colonial period. The ideology was established to combat slavery, colonialism, racism and imperialism, with the goal of correcting the historical injustices afforded to Africans throughout history (Taye, 2021, p. 32). Pan-Africanism organises individuals of African descent worldwide to challenge the critical issues within society, namely racial discrimination, economic exploitation and social segregation (Taye, 2021, p. 34).[1]

Linton Kwesi Johnson was born in 1952 in Clarendon, Jamaica, moving to London in 1963. Johnson went on to study Sociology at the University of London (The Poetry Archive). His membership and engagement with the Black Panther Party, during his studies, inspired him to vocalise the racial injustice he witnessed through the medium of poetry (Cousins, 2018; The Poetry Archive). His anger and opposition towards the racial injustice he witnessed was directed towards Thatcher's government, providing an often-neglected insight into the resistance and humane descriptions of rioting and life in the 1980s (The Poetry Archive).

Johnson experimented with cultural nationalism and Rastafari ideology, however, ultimately, he directed his loyalty to Black working-class communities in London (Cousins, 2018). His poetry is dominated by political sentiments, providing testimonies of police brutality and racialisation by state officials directly from Black people in the 1980s (The Poetry Archive). He expresses his experience of being an African-Caribbean through poetry which he perceived to be a 'cultural weapon and a political act' (The Poetry Archive).

Johnson's poem 'Di Great Insohreckshan' was produced in 1984 and Jamaican dialect is used (Liadan, 2016). The poem discusses the 1981 riots, beginning with a factual account regarding the dominance of police presence in Brixton, described as a 'ghetto' due to the underfunding and perceived criminality of Black people who lived in the area (Jackson, 2015, p. 159; Keith, 1993, p. 2; Liadan, 2016). However, he draws a sharp distinction between earlier events of rioting, describing it as a 'histarical okaysan', possibly due to 'victori' it achieved for their community in defence and solidarity towards decades of policing and criminalisation, and racialisation Black people endured in Britain (Jackson, 2015, p. 159; Liadan, 2016).

Ambikaipaker (2018, p. 4) presents a prominent example of this victory as the formation of the Newham Monitoring Project, a grassroots anti-racist organisation, which campaigned, and empowered ethnic minority communities to assert their legal rights in opposition to the racial discrimination they experienced. Liadan (2016) states that Johnson's poem offers a justification and explanation of why Black people rioted; it was, a result of provocation by state officials in which they 'naw tek mor a dem oppreshan'. A perspective discussed in Keith's (1993, p. 209) earlier work, which said that rioting was a response to the historical, social and by extension economic injustices afforded to Black people which culminated in these outbursts.

Johnson celebrates the solidarity and awakening of his community against racial discrimination and criminalisation while disregarding Scarman's attempts to address the situation (Liadan, 2016). Further, Johnson's poem, and accounts by academics like Jackson (2015, p. 159) demonstrate how Scarman's report failed to deal with the root cause of rioting, namely increased police presence and surveillance of Black bodies. The conclusion was that rioting will continue and the term 'BLAM BLAM' is used to depict gunshots, foreshadowing the Brixton riots of 1985 (Jackson, 2015, p. 159; Liadan, 2016). Keith (1993, pp. 73–4) asserted that inquiries were tools used to suppress further disturbances, for officials to appear to be investigating disturbances, and that it would be 'naïve' to expect an impartial report into such events from any commissioner, including Scarman.

Johnson's renowned poem 'Sonny's Lettah', commonly referred to as the Anti-Sus poem, captures the emotional and practical response of Black men when faced with criminalisation and racialisation by police officials (Maluca, 2014). The poem describes an ordinary scene where Johnson and a friend are waiting for a bus; however, when they are spotted by the police and subjected to the 'Sus' law, his friend is arrested without caution (Hall et al., 2013a, p. 48; Jackson, 2015, p. 159; Maluca, 2014). When his friend begins to voice his opposition to the application of 'Sus' he was 'thump' and 'kick', the onomatopoeic use of which conveys the brutality with which his friend was arrested (Maluca, 2014).

Johnson then describes his personal thoughts and emotions, feeling useless to assist, in which violence was the only way he could respond to the oppression unfolding before him, thus providing an insight into how 'sus' operated in the 1980s (Maluca, 2014). Jackson's (2015, p. 167) analysis contextualises this, in contrast to dominant media narratives about the rioters being delinquent teenagers and that it was a failure of their parents for not disciplining their children. It is suggested that the chaotic development of the poem reflects the speed with which actions escalated, as a result of 'Sus' (Maluca, 2014).

This provides a counterargument in which the violent outbursts in the 1980s were not pre-planned, instead they were emotional and practical responses to the racialisation of their community. It leads back to the implementation of 'Sus' and by extension the institutional racism of the state and its officials (Jackson, 2015, p. 159; Keith, 1993, p. 209).

Agard is another prominent member of the Black community whose cultural output is influenced by his experiences in Britain. Agard was born in 1949 in British Guiana (now Guyana), moving to England in 1977. He became a touring lecturer and visited UK schools to provide a better understanding of Caribbean culture (British Council, 2022). His poems are reflections of his social observations and discuss issues of race, ethnicity and morality, disrupting popular narratives and conceptions by providing alternative voices to these concepts (British Council, 2022).

His renowned poem 'half-caste' presents a comic take on the issue of race, racial misconceptions and divisions (Agard, 2005, pp. 11–13). It responded to the numerous discriminatory notions of race attributed to Black people. The poem critiques the

nonsensical notion of the term 'half-caste' through the repeated use of the term *'explain yurself'* (Agard, 2005, pp. 11–13). He provides metaphors of 'one leg', 'half of mih eye', 'half of mih ear' to demonstrate the irrationality with which people are referred to as 'half-caste' based on their race (Agard, 2005, p. 12). Agard points towards the overwhelming force of humanity as opposed to race, wherein our humanity is not defined by the race we belong to (Agard, 2005, pp. 11–13). He concludes upon the need to be 'whole' within us for social progression to occur (Agard, 2005, p. 13).

'Checking out me history' captures the current state of Black identity and the neglect of Black history in Britain, while providing methods to challenge such notions (Agard, 2005, pp. 60–2). The repetition of the pronoun 'dem' reflects the top-down approach towards the exclusion of Black contribution within British history. Eddo-Lodge (2018, pp. 8–9, 21) posits that the neglect of Black history in educational spheres prevents Black people from understanding their historical traditions and thus understanding their own history for fear that such inclusion would contaminate the perceived purity and 'whiteness' of British history. Agard (2005, pp. 60–1) juxtaposes elements of history that are taught, and highlights those that are overlooked such as the key contributions made by Black figures like Toussaint's slave rebellion, and Mary Seacole's service in the Crimean war, and 'de Caribs and de Arawaks' who are omitted when Columbus is discussed. Hall et al. (2013b, pp. 234–51) state that the falsifying of the history of slavery and colonialism, is reflective of mainstream perceptions about Black people as having no history, culture and civilisation prior to their encounter with the West which 'bestowed' this upon them. Despite presenting the exclusion of Black figures in British history, Agard (2005, p. 62) concludes that the notion of agency for Black people, and by extension other ethnic minorities, is to take back control and educate themselves about their own histories and to mark their identity around such contributions.

Agard's delivery of his poem 'Checking out me history' transitions from a sing-song to serious tones, presenting a sharp distinction, demanding mandatory attention and consideration that should be afforded to the contribution of Black figures in British history (BBC Teach, 2016). The clarion call compels readers to act and educate themselves and counter the popular narratives imposed on them by elites within the education system (BBC Teach, 2016). This is reflective of his Pan-African beliefs in correcting the historical injustice afforded to Black people through their neglect in British history and society.

Johnson provides a raw and provocative account regarding the 1980s riots and issues of race. However, Agard's poems are on opposite sides of the spectrum, calling for educational reforms with Pan-African and humanity-centred approaches in dealing with racism, identity and nationality.

Select cultural output from Zephaniah

Benjamin Zephaniah's poetry offers a middle ground between the works of Johnson and Agard due to his combination of Pan-African ideals, like Agard, and the incorporation of his racialised experiences, like Johnson. He does this through the lens of Rastafarianism which is reflected in his works and discourse about the topics of race, rioting and his philosophy of life.

Pan-Africanism and Rastafarianism are prominent themes in Zephaniah's work. Niaah (2003) defines Rastafarianism as a creed that emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s. It promotes the progress of African people regarding their freedom, emancipation and independence from the difficulties of daily life (Niaah, 2003). Kebede et al. (2000) explain how the distinctive element of Rastafarianism relates to their radical interpretation of life and their contention due to the omission of Black people within historical traditions and the development of Africa. Rastafari claim that these grievances are attributed to 'Babylon', referring to Western imposed values, governance of Africa, and its institutions during transatlantic slavery and the colonial period (Kebede et al, 2000, p. 318). Niaah

(2003, p. 835) argues that the philosophy of Rastafarianism encourages empowerment of Africans and the ideology of 'word sound is power'. This enables verbal responses through Caribbean oratory combined with sounds, music and poetry which create songs of freedom, resistance and redemption (Niaah, 2003). Niaah (2003) claims the movement is a solution to the issue of mental slavery, in the search for mental liberation within the neo-colonial world.

Zephaniah was born in 1958 to a working-class family in Birmingham. Being born in the post-colonial era, he witnessed the economic, racial and political subjugation and hatred evolving from this period until Thatcher's reign in the 1980s. Therefore, Zephaniah provides a longitudinal account and possible distinction between experiences from the 1960s and the 1980s.

Zephaniah conveys his experience of racial discrimination and criminalisation within his autobiography and his poems. He discusses the economic status of his community in which they were all struggling to abide by; however, despite the 'deprived' area he was brought up in, race played a pivotal role in distinguishing his family from the rest of the neighbourhood, being labelled as the only 'coloured' family on the street (Zephaniah, 2018, p. 15). He recalls his first racial attack, when he was labelled a 'black b*******' and told to return home (Zephaniah, 2018, pp. 18 & 20). Further, he recollects how his friend's father stated that Black people are undeserving of humanity and freedom, and they should all be slaves (Zephaniah, 2018, pp. 18 & 20).

Zephaniah was inspired, from a young age, by the music and poetry of Jamaica. He gained popularity at a young age as a poet capable of articulating national and international issues of concern (Zephaniah, 2018). During the 1980s race riots, his poetry was a form of resistance utilised by many: outside police stations, in youth meetings and in demonstrations (Zephaniah, 2018). His poetry moves away from established norms and academia, ensuring his work is relevant, accessible, political and musical for all audiences to access, regardless of their educational background (Zephaniah, 2018). Zephaniah's (2018) work is still relevant and inspiring, and continues the challenge to dismantle current systems of governance and politics through musical means.

The theme of racialisation is present in many of his poems, reflective of the deeply ingrained identity which has been imposed upon him as he seeks to understand and carve his identity around it. This is captured vividly in his poem 'Dis policeman keeps on kicking me to death' (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 96–8). He begins by explaining that this form of violence occurs at an institutional level, which he openly acknowledges. Zephaniah calls out the institutional racism present in Britain and conveys his disgust for the 'regime' which he describes as 'racist', 'bent' and 'worthless' (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 96). He expresses his disgust towards Thatcher who he states appealed to like-minded individuals who shared her sentiments. He highlights how her policies were not inclusive and encompassing of the differing factions in society (Zephaniah, 2018, p. 139). Keith (1993, p. 22) explains how this was reflective of the institutional racism evident during Thatcher's reign because of colonial attitudes towards Black people in stereotyping them as criminals and in need of policing. This was confirmed by accounts of police going 'n***** hunting' (Keith, 1993, p. 22).

Within this context, he extends these descriptions to Scarman and his report into the riots of the 1980s, declaring him as a 'fully signed up member of the establishment' (Zephaniah, 2018, p. 164). Hall et al. (2013a, p. 390) claim that such attitudes are reflective of the Black communities' sentiments towards Scarman's report due to his neglect in defining institutional racism, alongside him blaming these outbursts on young Black people.

Zephaniah moves on to provide a juxtaposing argument in which his body can be imprisoned but not his mind, reflective of his strong will and the ideals of his Rastafarian beliefs which he embodies when considering such brutality (Niaah, 2003, pp.

828–9; Zephaniah, 1985). The poem exposes the hypocrisy of the police who do not secure the peace and security of their communities, rather they unleash horror and torture upon them (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 96–8). Keith discusses this in reference to reports that documented how the police would go 'n***** hunting' for fun, due to racist colonial sentiments and the application of 'Sus' which enabled them to police Black bodies (Keith, 1993, p. 22). This is captured through the repetition of the onomatopoeic term 'kick', depicting the continued belittlement and degradation the state, through its officials such as the police, imposes upon Black people (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 96–8). He offers a justification and plea of innocence and reflects on the economic conditions in the 1980s and the lack of investment in society that resulted in unemployment and its correlation with petty crime in which he was 'living in de ghetto… trying to do good…', when he was arrested (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 97). The concept of 'war' is introduced and linked to racism and criminalisation, an ongoing battle in which Black men are abused by the state and state officials 'every day and every night' (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 98). Ambikaipaker (2018, p. 5) mentions this in reference to campaigns used by Black people in defence and solidarity with their community such as the Newham Monitoring Project. Through dark imagery relating to the night, bats and isolation, a distinction is offered in which Black people are not abused in public, compared to earlier periods of history, rather it happens in isolated situations, possibly due to social advancements and public sentiments in favour of Black emancipation and humanity (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 98).

Zephaniah responds to such racialisation and criminalisation by calling for a united front against the state. This is what Hall et al. (2013a, p. 390) characterised as neo-liberal with a conservative agenda, captured in his poem 'Fight dem' (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 13–15). The repetition of the phrase 'fight dem not me', reinforces Williams' (2015, p. 19) opposition to the representation of Black people as scapegoats and the 'other' which people are blinded by, as opposed to Zephaniah's calls for pursuing the establishment who are the real problem (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 13–15). However, he presents his distinct struggle, compared to other minorities and classes in Britain, captured within the phrase: 'I have my tribulations to bear (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 13). Ambikaipaker (2018, p. 20) argues that this is on account of the racism, criminalisation and historical injustice afforded to Black people throughout the colonial period and their migration to Britain. Despite this, he does not demand any special treatment or provision, rather he is seeking 'an equal share' of Britain (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 13).

Zephaniah (1985, p. 13) presents parallels between the division the establishment causes once the bigger picture is overlooked, with racism being directed towards Black people, while the establishment 'kills the Irish', colonises lands and increases corruption. He calls for a united front, and for disgust to be directed towards the establishment, not Black people, because Black people bear the same brunt, and sometimes worse subjugation, compared to other ethnic minorities in Britain (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 15). Niaah (2003) suggests this is reflective of his Rastafari belief in freeing people from the difficulties of daily life, namely: corruption, failed economies and societies because of state policy. These notions are reinforced in the conclusion of the piece with the phrase 'not me' (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 15).

His Pan-African outlook is reflected in his poem 'Free South Afrika/Stop De War' which was a tribute to Nelson Mandela (Zephaniah, 1985, pp. 102–04). Taye (2021) summarises this as solidarity with his own community in the face of oppression by colonial and 'western' elites. Owusu-Kwarteng refers to Nelson Mandela's statement about Black people being the sons and daughters of Africa, regardless of their geographical locations, because of slavery (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2017, p. 6). The poem discusses the hypocrisy of the West in relation to the human rights abuses in South Africa which were overlooked due to Thatcher's refusal to place sanctions on their apartheid regime and the violence which ensued (Bourne, 2013, p. 88; Zephaniah, 1985, p. 102). Therefore, the West is not required or

appreciated, rather the aim is 'repatriation', 'liberation' and ultimately 'freedom'. This is viewed as a reflection of his Rastafari ideology and Pan-African outlook, seeking the liberation of Black people from the critical issues of society, specifically apartheid (Niaah, 2003, p. 826; Taye, 2021, p. 34). He concludes on the sentiments of the South African people in which the 'illegal invader' of Europe was to be completely expelled for the South African people to utilise their right to self-determination (Zephaniah, 1985, p. 104). Further, Zephaniah offers a distinction from popular narratives of apartheid which are dominated by political and racial subjugation as opposed to considering Ambikaipaker's (2018, p. 28) statement about accommodating and conveying the concerns of the South African people in response to the global movements around the world for self-determination.

Zephaniah's poetry provides a culmination of experiences relating to global outlooks regarding racialisation, politics and spirituality which are influenced by his personal experiences and his Rastafarian beliefs. His work on racial discrimination is heavily influenced by Johnson. The similarities are evident in the ways in which their experiences of racial discrimination and criminalisation are expressed. However, his form of activism relating to education and Pan-Africanism aligns him to Agard to counter such racialisation and subjugation. Consequently, Zephaniah offers a middle ground between the two in capturing the racism, racialisation and responses utilised by Black people in the 1980s and contemporary periods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has attempted to provide agency to the Black community, capturing their lived experiences of racialised discrimination and criminalisation within the post-colonial era in Britain, but more specifically the period of the 1980s. This article has captured the diversity of experience within the Black community by utilising various methods to present a representative account of the 1980s riots, memories thereof within Black culture and popular memory, alongside the responses used by the Black community to tackle and resolve such issues.

The academic works of Hall and Gilroy, specifically Hall's work *Representation* and Gilroy's *There ain't no black in the Union Jack* have been analysed and compared with the grassroot accounts captured within the cultural outputs of Johnson, Agard and Zephaniah. This provides an insight into the representation and exclusion of Black people in post-war Britain with specific focus given to the 1970s and 1980s. This would enable greater insight into vital grassroot experiences which have often been neglected in academia.

Future research on topics of race relations must account for grassroot experiences and contextualise them within wider social and political contexts in order to provide more authentic accounts of ethnic minority experiences. Research should include an investigation of attitudes, experiences, historical relationships and cultural legacies in Britain in the post-colonial era.

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