


# Truth, Justice, and Expertise in 1980s Britain: the Cultural Politics of the New Cross Massacre

by Aaron Andrews 

Early in the morning on Sunday 18 January 1981, thirteen young black men, women and children were killed in a house fire on New Cross Road in the London Borough of Lewisham. The exact cause of the fire has been contested ever since, while the response of the state and media – veering at times between indifference and hostility – has become emblematic of the structural racism of British society. This article examines the cultural political movement, led by a network of prominent black British activists, which was established in the aftermath of the fire to raise funds for the injured and bereaved, defend the victims’ reputations from press attacks, and campaign for the ‘true’ cause of the fire to be established. The campaign of the New Cross Massacre Action Committee, it argues, showed how the racism long experienced by black urban communities eroded trust in state institutions. Following the fire, members of these communities contested the official narrative, as established in the police investigation and a coroner’s inquest, through protests and the deployment of alternative forms of expertise. Finally, this article suggests that this was not an isolated case. The 1980s was a decade of disasters which led people in marginalized communities to engage in long-running disputes with the state in the aftermath of significant tragedies, suggesting that, during this period, there was a much wider erosion of trust in the state and the truths it told.

Between 5:45 and 5:55 a.m. on Sunday 18 January 1981, a fire broke out in the front room of 439 New Cross Road in the London Borough of Lewisham. Beginning on the ground floor, the fire quickly spread upstairs where a joint sixteenth and eighteenth-birthday party had been taking place but was then winding down. Thirteen young black men, women and children aged between fourteen and twenty-two died. Twenty-five more were injured, many seriously, and two-and-a-half years later, a young man who had been suffering from psychological trauma after being caught in the fire took his own life, becoming its fourteenth victim.<sup>1</sup> From that January morning, stories began to spread around New Cross and within London’s black communities about the true cause of the fire. Many people, including police officers at the scene, pointed the finger of blame at the neo-fascist National Front. However, in the days and weeks that followed, and against

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a backdrop of an emerging anti-immigrant and anti-black discourse located around the West Indian house party, the focus of official blame turned towards the partygoers themselves.<sup>2</sup> For the families and political activists linked to the British Black Power movement, accusations levelled from within the national press and the relative silence of the British state immediately following the fire (most pointedly neither Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher nor Queen Elizabeth II publicly acknowledged the deaths, let alone mourned them) demonstrated, at best, the indifference of those institutions to the lives of black Britons. At worst, it confirmed their hostility, their view that the black youths did not belong in British society. The state's silence thus became a clarion call for political action at the beginning of a year of uprisings across several English cities and its effects continue to reverberate.<sup>3</sup> Through the collective mourning for those who lost their lives, the fire shaped, and continues to shape, black political and cultural identities.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true in New Cross, where the tragedy has been woven into the urban landscape through public memorials located at sites specific to the disaster, the campaign for truth and justice, and the lives of the young victims. These include a plaque at Lewisham Town Hall (installed in 1997), a window at St Andrew's United Reform Church (2002), another plaque affixed to 439 New Cross Road (2011), and a memorial stone and bench at Fordham Park (2012). The memories and names of the victims – and the story of the New Cross Massacre – have not been forgotten because of the efforts of cultural and political activists.

The state and national press called the disaster the 'Deptford fire', but Black Power and left-wing political activists named it the New Cross Massacre, in recognition of their belief that the tragedy had been caused by a racist arson attack. While the cause of the fire remains uncertain, two things are clear. Firstly, the victims were not to blame. Secondly, the aftermath of the tragedy clearly demonstrated the continuing and corrosive effects of racism in Britain.<sup>5</sup> In the suspicions over its true cause, and following the sometimes muted, sometimes hostile response of state and media, the fire became emblematic of the much longer history of racism, violence, and racialized othering experienced by black Britons in the decades after the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> Interwoven into activists' response to the fire, therefore, was the recent history of racist murders, discriminatory prosecutions, and attacks by the National Front and its predecessors on black people in Britain. Recognizing and mobilizing this history, the Black People's Day of Action – a protest march through central London in March 1981 – was organized by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (NCMAC). It was 'a simple plea for recognition and justice', one of many made by black Britons whose lives and citizenship rights were constantly under threat, as Kennetta Hammond Perry has observed.<sup>7</sup> Against these variegated experiences of structural racism and violence, the British Black Power movement sought to bring people of colour in Britain – especially those of African, African Caribbean and South Asian descent – under the unifying identity of

‘political blackness’.<sup>8</sup> Political blackness framed much of the cultural-political response to the New Cross Massacre; through it, the fire and the systemic issues it highlighted were drawn into a common experience which was instrumental in creating a black British identity. As the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, who was heavily involved in the campaign for truth and justice, wrote: ‘disya massakah mek wi come fi realise / it couda bi mi / it couda bi yu’.<sup>9</sup>

The New Cross Massacre occurred at a critical historiographical juncture and as such was written into the narrative of black British history within a few years of the disaster. In Peter Fryer’s totemic *Staying Power* (1984), the fire features on the final two pages alongside the Black People’s Day of Action and the urban uprisings which occurred in the same year. Presenting it as the culmination of nearly 2,000 years of black British presence, Fryer suggested that recognition of this long history would form the basis for the black British future.<sup>10</sup> This temporal imagination, linking black history to a black future, was resolutely clear throughout the New Cross Massacre campaign, but especially during the Black People’s Day of Action, as Rob Waters has argued.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in his 1987 work *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy framed the fire within the long history of media representations of black criminality, the race relations paradigm, and the many ways structural racism has been enacted and perpetuated by the British state.<sup>12</sup> Subsequent accounts have shown the New Cross Massacre to be a moment of tragic injustice which, presaging the uprisings in cities across England several months later, contributed to the formation of a black British cultural and political identity which was most clearly expressed during the Black People’s Day of Action – a crucial event which many accounts of the political response to the fire do not go beyond.<sup>13</sup> That the New Cross Massacre featured so prominently in these 1980s accounts of black British history and culture is illustrative of its significance as both a historical and a historiographical moment. Preserving and writing the history of the New Cross Massacre was itself an act of political resistance against state indifference.

The silence over the deaths is replicated in the archives. Just as activists sought to respond to the immediate injustice, they also worked to ensure that the story has been preserved. As Caroline Bressey has shown, ‘mainstream’ archives in the United Kingdom – especially those established by local and national government – present a ‘whitewashed’ narrative of British history in which black Britons are either conspicuously absent or not registered as black subjects.<sup>14</sup> While the New Cross Massacre is present in central governmental archives, there is an imbalance. A total of three Home Office and Lord Chancellor’s Office files, held at the National Archives at Kew, discuss the case, the complaints made against the Inner South London Coroner, and the implications for the coroners’ system in England and Wales.<sup>15</sup> A collection of nineteen files created by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) was transferred to the National Archives but remains closed until 2087.

The proportion of documents which are closed dwarfs that of those which are open. There are important reasons for keeping the DPP files closed. As Freedom of Information requests submitted by the author make clear, the case is not considered to be closed, and so putting the investigation files into the public domain could prejudice any potential – though highly unlikely – prosecution. Significant details of the investigation, however, can be found in another non-standard government archive: the Inner South London Coroner's Office in Southwark. The Coroner's records contain medical and personal information about the victims and others present at the party and were accessed under a confidentiality agreement on this most sensitive material. Gaining access to this material provided a vital insight into the course of events surrounding the fire. However, the graphic injury detail contained in the documents (which is not replicated here) explains the additional reason given for not releasing the DPP files – protecting the mental health of the victims' families and friends. Nevertheless, an archival silence remains. While oral histories can provide an important means for historians to fill such silences, it would be unethical to ask people to recall the disaster without the possibility of that potentially traumatic experience leading to truth or justice.<sup>16</sup> Their stories have, however, been recorded in other archives.

As with the initial silence over the deaths and identities of the victims, the archival silence was filled by the New Cross Massacre activists. The files of the NCMAC are held at the George Padmore Institute (GPI) in Finsbury Park, London. Located above New Beacon Books – the first black bookshop in Britain; established by John La Rose and Sarah White in 1966 – the GPI was founded in 1991 to house archival materials and develop educational resources relating to the cultural and political histories of black communities in Britain. Other leading figures in the movement have also donated their personal papers to other repositories, including the London Metropolitan Archives (the papers of Jessica and Eric Huntley and of Sybil Phoenix).<sup>17</sup> Further materials, including oral histories, are held at the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London. These archives of black political and cultural activism are complemented by other historical artefacts: songs, poems, and photographs which have been recorded, published, and distributed to tell the story of the New Cross Massacre. The creation of this extensive and dispersed archive of black cultural and political activism was in itself a form of activism which has preserved the story for future generations and ensured that whitewashed archives are not the sole source.<sup>18</sup> Excepting the Huntley and Phoenix papers held at the London Metropolitan Archives, their placement in specialist repositories speaks to the continued marginalization of black British history in government archives. Nevertheless, their construction also points to the potential of archives and historiography as anti-racist tools, something recognized by Fryer and others. Moreover, it highlights the political culture of the British Black Power movement; many of its leading figures were publishers, writers and

poets – storytellers who sought to change the narrative not just at that moment, but for the future. These archival collections are not themselves completely open – documents held at the GPI include sensitive personal information – but they do offer the most comprehensive set of records on the fire, the investigation, and the truth and justice campaign, containing a variety of materials including witness statements taken by the police and the campaign’s own activists.

Through these governmental and activist archives, this article argues, the New Cross Massacre campaign were able to contest the state’s effective monopoly – enacted through the judicial system as well as the archive – on official ‘truth’. The modern British state’s desire and ability to subvert truths was demonstrated through the destruction or concealment of colonial records.<sup>19</sup> Truth and justice campaigns became especially important from the beginning of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s.<sup>20</sup> As the Troubles spilled over into Great Britain, so too did the critical question of the state’s ability or willingness to tell the truth, as in the case of the ‘Birmingham Six’.<sup>21</sup> Following a series of tragedies during the 1980s – including masscasualty disasters, terrorist attacks, deaths in police custody, and legal injustices – such campaigns were established by networks of relatives, community activists, and legal organizations. Examples include the Bradford 12 Defence Committee and the legal charity INQUEST (which investigated deaths in police custody), both established in 1981.<sup>22</sup> Other 1980s tragedies, including the 1984 Battle of Orgreave and the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, led to analogous campaigns for truth and justice, but these were established much later – in 2012 and 1998 respectively. More work is needed on the links between these campaigns, especially on the politico-legal activists and radical law firms which advised, represented, and often connected them. Understanding the myriad ways in which the New Cross Massacre campaign subverted the state’s monopoly on truth can help to better understand the anti-racist activism of the British Black Power movement and the resistance to state violence in all its forms in late twentieth-century Britain.

Through the case of the New Cross Massacre campaign, this article examines the cultural and political response to tragedy within marginalized communities in late twentieth-century Britain. Firstly, it shows how the cultural politics of memorialization was used to raise awareness of the tragedy beyond the local community, defend the reputations of the victims, and resist the othering imposed by the state. Secondly, it shows how activists contested the official narrative as told by the state by deploying the expertise of experience – that is, by drawing on the history of racist incidents to construct an alternative truth – in street protests and courtroom arguments. The history of state violence and mismanaged police investigations was deployed as part of this expertise to disrupt the state’s authority to establish official truths. Finally, the article examines the legal campaign, fought through the courts over several decades, to both establish the true cause of the fire,

and ensure that the legal system operated openly, fairly, and justly for all. This was especially important as the operation of the coroner's courts came under greater scrutiny in the early 1980s, with many voices questioning their ability to adjudicate over complex and controversial cases.

#### 'THATCHER, IN HER SILENCE, INCITES VIOLENCE': THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MEMORIALIZATION

The fire at 439 New Cross Road was extinguished at 7:46 am – around two hours after it had started.<sup>23</sup> At King's College, Greenwich District and other hospitals in London and the South East of England, families and friends tried to find out about the fate of their loved ones.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the day, the death toll stood at ten, with twenty-eight more injured – although it took several days for this total to be established. Local activists were quick to mobilize on hearing of the fire, with the response ranging from communitarian support to political action. Sybil Phoenix, leader of the local Moonshot Youth Club, liaised with the police and opened the newly-built but still unfurnished Pagnell Street Community Centre as a space where locals could coalesce in their shock and grief, and try to identify people who may have been caught in the blaze.<sup>25</sup> Phoenix took Armza Ruddock, the mother who had organized the fateful party at her home, from Lewisham Police Station to Greenwich District Hospital, where two of her children were in a critical condition. Phoenix later described taking Ruddock to her home, bathing her, and giving her a sedative to help her sleep.<sup>26</sup> At this time, Phoenix took the lead in shaping the community response to the fire, controlling access to Armza Ruddock, liaising with the police, and having early discussions on funerals for the victims. Journalists from the weekly newspaper *Westindian World* arrived in New Cross to cover the tragedy, reporting that 'At the time of going to press a Scotland Yard spokesman confirmed that every indication pointed to a possible fire bomb or an incendiary device of some kind'.<sup>27</sup> Representatives from the West Indian Standing Conference, an umbrella organization established in 1958 to liaise between Caribbean community groups and the High Commission of the short-lived West Indies Federation in London, had also arrived in New Cross and called a public meeting for the following Sunday (25 January).<sup>28</sup> These people and organizations largely aligned with the existing race relations paradigm, but news of the fire also mobilized a network of activists from the British Black Power movement. In Finsbury Park, John La Rose, Jessica and Eric Huntley, and Darcus Howe, leading members of the 'Black Alliance', were meeting to discuss the organization of a Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books.<sup>29</sup> Their meeting ended upon hearing of the fire, and the group went to New Cross where later, along with broadcaster and journalist Alex Pascall, they met Ruddock at Phoenix's house. That evening, when Pascall interviewed Ruddock for his daily BBC Radio London programme, *Black Londoners*, she reported that false claims had been made on the radio

about the events leading up to the fire and repeated the theory, told to her by two police officers, that the fire was likely the result of arson.<sup>30</sup>

These early actions illustrated fractures within the political and community response to the New Cross Massacre, presented as a dichotomy between the race relations paradigm – the main organs of which La Rose would later call the ‘colonial office for blacks in British society’ – and the British Black Power movement.<sup>31</sup> The latter soon took the lead, and on 20 January 1981, just two days after the fire, members of the Black Alliance – drawn from the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement, and *Race Today* Collective – along with representatives from community organizations such as the Rugby West Indian Centre, held a public meeting at the Moonshot Youth Club.<sup>32</sup> The choice of venue was significant: the old Moonshot club premises, a short distance from 439 New Cross Road, had been burned down in December 1977 in a suspected arson attack by members of the National Front.<sup>33</sup> At the meeting, a number of committees were established to lead the political response to the fire: the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (NCMAC) and the Fact Finding Committee, which later changed its name to the Fact Finding Commission (FFC). These were in addition to a committee of the parents of the victims and a smaller committee which managed the New Cross Fire Fund, set up on 18 January 1981 to support the families of the victims.<sup>34</sup> However, there were ruptures within the campaign which captured the diversity of anti-racist political activism in late twentieth-century Britain. While some activists sought to work within the established race relations paradigm, others sought to challenge it; and while British Black Power activists framed the campaign within political blackness and sought white allies, members of the Pan-African Congress Movement in particular attempted to limit involvement to people of African and African Caribbean descent.<sup>35</sup> In spite of these political differences, it was the suspicion that the fire had been caused by a racist arson attack and questions surrounding the much maligned investigation and inquest which united these groups within a broad church campaign.

The NCMAC, chaired by John La Rose, functioned as the executive of the political campaign and oversaw regional sections based in London and other English cities. The FFC, convened by Ken Williams of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, investigated what were seen as likely or possible causes of the fire, some of which had been discounted by the police. Its intention was also to establish and publicize the facts of the fire, and so at its first full meeting, the FFC resolved to ‘present to the people ... an exact figure of those who died and those who are injured in hospital’.<sup>36</sup> After the death of Yvonne Ruddock – whose sixteenth birthday was being celebrated at the house party – following a fall from her hospital bed on 24 January 1981, the FFC sought a full investigation.<sup>37</sup> The next day, fifteen-year old Glenton Powell also died of his injuries at East Grinstead Hospital in West Sussex, raising the death toll to twelve. Establishing the facts of the tragedy served a dual purpose. The New Cross Massacre campaign was led by representatives

of a wide range of political organizations which, though linked to black communities in London, had little direct knowledge of the families affected by the tragedy. Through the FFC, the leaders of the campaign therefore sought to acquire the basic information – names, addresses, and occupations of the parents of the victims – required to build the movement. While the Black Alliance sought to operate outside of the race relations paradigm, they nonetheless required the co-operation of its institutions and representatives. The FFC were initially reliant on Phoenix and the Lewisham Race Relations Council which, since the morning of the fire, had been liaising with the police, the families of the victims and survivors, members of the local community, and the local authority. In their efforts to establish the facts surrounding the deaths of these young people, the FFC were also attempting to ensure that the scale of the tragedy, and its human faces, were not forgotten; this was especially important as the newspapers began to lose interest in the story.

Set against the prompt and vociferous response of black political and community organizations, the state and the press were relatively silent. This is not to say that these institutions did not acknowledge the tragedy; the state, through the police and judicial system, investigated the cause of the fire, while newspapers reported the deaths and injuries. However, this coverage came under strong criticism, with activists claiming that most daily newspapers, with the exception of the *Guardian* and *Morning Star*, reported that the tragedy had happened, made misleading claims, and then ignored any subsequent developments, including further deaths. Speaking at a press conference at the Moonshot Club in mid February 1981, Sybil Phoenix admonished the press and the government for their lack of attention and sympathy:

If a dogs home was attacked and twelve dogs burned the press would be asking ‘how could dogs be treated this way?’ [...] sometime ago a kennel was burnt down and a surviving kitten made the news for days, yet we have a situation where black people have been murdered and to date there have not even been any messages of sympathy from the Prime Minister of this country.<sup>38</sup>

Activists within the New Cross campaign identified the lack of public mourning by leading figures, especially the Prime Minister and the Queen, as a form of silence. This silence became more apparent in the wake of another fire, in the early hours of 14 February 1981, at the Stardust nightclub in Dublin. In response to the forty-eight deaths and more than 200 injuries resulting from the nightclub fire, both Margaret Thatcher and the Queen sent a letter of condolence to the Irish Taoiseach. Set against the silence over the deaths of the New Cross victims four weeks prior, people in Lewisham began to ask why Thatcher had not sent a similar letter to the bereaved families. Unable, as they put it, to explain the ‘protocol which



governs these things', a member of the local clergy wrote to Downing Street to ask for advice.<sup>39</sup> Following this request, advisors within Downing Street began to formulate a possible response which would 'mak[e] the point that the absence of a formal message does not mean that natural feelings of sympathy are lacking'.<sup>40</sup> Letters of condolence were eventually sent through Sybil Phoenix and a member of the local clergy, more than five weeks after the New Cross fire in response to these deputations.<sup>41</sup> As Judith Butler argued, the obituary – as a form of public mourning usually published in a newspaper – 'is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy'.<sup>42</sup> While the sending of letters of condolence was governed by competing diplomatic and domestic protocols, they took on a similar meaning to the obituaries described by Butler. As a form of public mourning, the existence of one letter and absence of another became emblematic of the state's attitudes to black Britons, signifying that whereas the dead of the Stardust fire were publicly grievable, the New Cross victims were not. The media's silence implied that the lives of the New Cross victims were not noteworthy; the state's silence implied that their lives were not deemed significant enough to merit grieving and, worse, that these black Britons did not belong.

The largest demonstration organized by the New Cross Massacre campaigners was the Black People's Day of Action, a protest march through central London on 2 March 1981 which signalled black communities' determination to resist racist attacks, media criticism, state violence, and state indifference. The symbolism of the march, as Rob Waters has argued, pointed to the 'necessity and inevitability of change' wrought by the disaster, with the day of action being infused with a sense of 'history-making, historical becoming, and historical possibility'.<sup>43</sup> As an act of memorialization, the march was intended to fill the silence rendered by the state and media, and occupy the urban spaces in which those institutions were located. One slogan, published on posters and badges, put the message of the march very simply: 'come what may, we are here to stay'.<sup>44</sup> Preparations for the Black People's Day of Action began on 1 February. The march was initially planned to begin in New Cross, then progress to Fleet Street, and on past the Houses of Parliament and Downing Street, before ending outside New Scotland Yard.<sup>45</sup> Marching past the headquarters of the press, parliament, the government, and the police, this route as first planned was a spatially manifested rebuke of the institutions which the campaigners saw as having marginalized and maligned the victims of the fire. However, the NCMAC also sought to mobilize parliamentary action in support of their campaign. A group of thirteen prominent Labour MPs – including party leader Michael Foot, deputy leader Denis Healey, and MP for Lewisham Deptford John Silkin whose constituency covered New Cross – were enlisted to move an Early Day Motion during the day of action in support of the protest. Because of this, the march was held on a weekday when parliament was in

session and the route had to be changed, following negotiations with the Metropolitan Police, to avoid Whitehall and the Palace of Westminster.<sup>46</sup> A series of posters and flyers were printed to publicize the Black People's Day of Action with the common headline 'New Cross Massacre: 12 Dead, 27 Injured'.<sup>47</sup> However, on 9 February 1981, Paul Ruddock, son of Armza and brother to Yvonne, succumbed to his injuries at Greenwich Hospital. Jessica Huntley, the publisher, political activist, and leader of the Ealing section of the NCMAC, amended her copy of one of the flyers to read: '13 Dead, 26 Injured'.<sup>48</sup>

Cultural and political activists filled the silence produced by the state and the news media with the sound of reggae and dub poetry.<sup>49</sup> At a concert to raise money for the New Cross Fire Fund in March 1981, the reggae band Matumbi clearly stated this intention: 'Normally we'd give you one minute's silence, but tonight we give you a minute of notes'.<sup>50</sup> The dub poets Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah, and reggae artist Johnny Osbourne memorialized the victims and castigated the response of the media and government through the common refrain of '13 dead and nothing said', exhorting their listeners to not forget, lamenting 'what this world is coming to', and drawing the fire into a wider experience of racial discrimination and racist violence.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Nefertiti Gayle later wrote a poem which drew the New Cross fire into a common experience of racist violence alongside other suspicious deaths in London, the killing of young black people in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States (1979–81), and the violent suppression of the 1976 Soweto uprising against the Apartheid government in Johannesburg, South Africa. These geographically and temporally separate events were brought together through the suspicion – or definitive proof – that the deaths had been the result of racist attacks which had been covered up by the respective states: 'An' we haf fe realise / Dat dere's no disguise / When dem killin and shootin / An' covering up lies'.<sup>52</sup> The reggae artist Sir Collins also produced an album of fourteen songs in an act of memorialization for 'The thirteen youths who died in the New Cross fire. And his close friend Bob Marley', who died in May 1981. The album features Marley, as well as the voice of Steven Collins, Sir Collins' son who was part of the sound system known as Gemini that played at the house party, and who was one of the victims.<sup>53</sup> It is one of the few instances where the voice of one of the victims of the fire can truly be heard. While these were cultural expressions of grief, they were also a call to action: to remember the victims; to recognize the global struggle against racism; and to organize political movements against violence.

The sounds of cultural memorialization extended beyond London through the activities of the NCMAC's regional sections in Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, and Rugby. Darcus Howe was especially important in travelling around the country to co-ordinate these regional sections which were built around existing activist networks and organizations, and led by local community activists.<sup>54</sup> Some regional organizations had direct links to

the victims; the Rugby section of the NCMAC, built around the town's West Indian Centre, was particularly active, at least in the days immediately following the fire.<sup>55</sup> Humphrey Browne, one of the victims of the fire, had lived in the town, which was also home to relatives of the Ruddock family. The regional sections organized a number of events – including poetry readings, concerts, and dances – to raise money for the Fire Fund and political awareness of what they saw as a massacre which had effectively been covered up by the state. While these activities promoted awareness across England of the victims of the fire and the campaign's criticisms of the police investigation, the majority of political action was focused in London. The regional sections therefore organized transport for campaigners to travel to London to attend demonstrations outside the house on New Cross Road and, later, outside the Royal Courts of Justice during the inquest into the deaths and the subsequent appeal against its findings. For example, the academic and campaigner Gus John later recalled that the Manchester section of the NCMAC sent six coach loads of protesters to join the Black People's Day of Action in March 1981.<sup>56</sup>

In an act reminiscent of the 1959 funeral for murdered Antiguan-Briton Kelso Cochrane, attended by over 1,000 mourners, protesters during the Black People's Day of Action marched behind a coffin, held aloft by some of the victims' family members, symbolizing the young lives cut short by the fire.<sup>57</sup> This was a very public act of memorialization through which the identities of the thirteen victims were paraded past the institutions which had shown indifference to their deaths (see [Figure 1](#)). Emotions ran high, and though the organizers sought to maintain order through a code of behaviour, interactions between the police and the press during the march led to small-scale confrontations. The code of behaviour specified that stewards should 'keep [the] march moving even when the delegation departs for representation'.<sup>58</sup> It was at this critical time, as the NCMAC delegation moved ahead of the march to meet with politicians at the Palace of Westminster and 10 Downing Street, as well as senior officers at Scotland Yard, that a combined force of Metropolitan and City of London police officers attempted to funnel the march as it made its way across Blackfriars Bridge. For the marchers, the police action was suspect. The symbolic importance of the bridge as a route into the City of London which had not been traversed by protesters since the Chartists in 1848 was acknowledged by some of the leaders of the NCMAC and within the left-wing press after the march.<sup>59</sup> Some of the younger activists at the head of the march, though perhaps unaware of this historical symbolism, feared that the force had been sent to stop the march in its tracks. An ethnographer who was present during the Black People's Day of Action, along with members of the group he was studying as part of a wider Policy Studies Institute project, described antagonism between the police and the protesters, and how the presence of a black police officer at Blackfriars Bridge inflamed tensions among some of the younger, more radical marchers.<sup>60</sup> In an effort to ensure that the



**Fig. 1.** Marcher carrying an image of Owen Wesley Thompson during the Black People's Day of Action. Photograph by Vron Ware for *Searchlight: the Anti-Fascist Monthly* (1981). Ware's images are now held by Autograph ABP and have also been published in Vron Ware, *The Black People's Day of Action 02.03.1981*, Southport, 2020, no pp. (CC BY-NC 4.0).

demonstration would progress towards the institutions against which the protesters were marching, several pushed against the police lines. The attempt to control the demonstrators thus had the opposite effect, exacerbating several marchers' suspicion of the police and creating a situation in which a number of them surged ahead of the main body of activists and their stewards.

From Blackfriars Bridge, many protesters moved quickly towards Fleet Street. Still in 1981 the location of many newspapers' main offices, Fleet Street became the focus of anguish following accusations that the daily newspapers had misreported the fire, claiming that the partygoers were to blame, ignoring further developments in the investigation and not reporting subsequent deaths. While Fleet Street was a site of violence during the march, the stories of the Black People's Day of Action published in the popular and tabloid press were sensationalized and implicitly racist. The *Sun* published a two-page spread under the headline 'Day the blacks ran riot in London'; the *Daily Mail*, in a story which dehumanized the people marching in memory of thirteen young black Britons, also focused on the episodes of violence in which 'the black tide met the thin blue line'; and the *Daily Star*, next to a large photograph of young black men being beaten by police officers with truncheons reported '17 cops hurt as thugs turn blaze-protest march into a terror riot'.<sup>61</sup> Similar tropes were present in broadsheet

newspapers, with the *Daily Telegraph* reporting: ‘Black youths run riot during march’.<sup>62</sup> Through the national press, the protest march to memorialize the victims of the New Cross Massacre ended with the vilification of black Britons. This mediated coverage of the day of action was contested by the reporting by the black, left-wing, and local press. These publications did not ignore the small episodes of confrontation, but they did focus their coverage on the message and conduct of the march overall, rather than the response of a small minority of young protesters to police and press provocations – especially the puerile and dehumanizing heckling which emanated from the Fleet Street offices of several right-wing newspapers. The front cover of *Westindian World*, for example, carried a simple refrain: ‘Lest we forget’.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, the *Socialist Worker* reported that ‘There wasn’t a riot in Fleet Street. . . But there bloody well *should* have been!’<sup>64</sup> An alternative account of the day was also provided through activists’ photographs. In contrast to the chaotic images published in the *Sun* and other daily popular newspapers, journalist Vron Ware’s photographs, taken during the day of action, emphasized order, unity, and collective action.<sup>65</sup> While the NCMAC took steps to prevent any disruption during the march, it is clear that violence reflected emotional responses to the actions of the state and mass media, and the implication that their lack of public mourning questioned black Britons’ rights of citizenship and belonging. In response to the events on Blackfriars Bridge and later disorder around Fleet Street, national daily newspapers published stories admonishing the protest. The New Cross Massacre came back to the attention of the media, but as a side story under racist and dehumanizing banner headlines.

#### ‘MASSACRE NOT MISADVENTURE’: THE EXPERTISE OF EXPERIENCE

Political action surrounding the investigation into the cause of the New Cross fire drew on the lived experiences of local residents and campaigners to contest the narrative of events being developed by the police. At the first general meeting, during which the NCMAC and FFC were established, one person was recorded as saying: ‘A normal petrol bomb could not burn everything up so quickly’. To which another retorted: ‘must have been a very inflammable spirit’.<sup>66</sup> As this exchange shows, people’s response to the New Cross Massacre – and their mistrust of official narratives – was framed by the incidence of racist arson attacks perpetrated by racist and fascist organizations including the British Movement and National Front in Lewisham. This was a form of expertise rooted in experience rather than technical qualifications – the result of having seen the effects of a ‘normal petrol bomb’ and recognizing that the pace of the blaze at 439 New Cross Road was not ‘normal’.<sup>67</sup> As Jennifer Crane has shown in relation to child protection, campaign groups led by individuals with personal experience of abuse were established from the 1960s and challenged the ‘traditionally placed “experts”, such as physicians, social workers, solicitors, and policy-

makers'.<sup>68</sup> The ability of such campaign groups to challenge the traditional expert depended upon collaboration with the mainstream media, an avenue which was much less open to the NCMAC. Instead, New Cross Massacre campaigners relied on alternative means through which they could deploy their collective experiential expertise, including the establishment of the FFC to collect testimonies and evidence. The experiential expertise deployed by New Cross activists was wide-ranging, rooted in the experiences of living in Lewisham, being black in Britain, and encountering the carceral state. It enabled campaigners to deploy the recent history of structural racism in British society – especially mismanaged police inquiries and legal injustices – as the basis for their criticism of the investigation.

The FFC was the principal mechanism for the collection and dissemination of evidence and experiential expertise in the New Cross campaign. As stated at its first meeting, the committee was established 'to gather information from people and parents about what took place'. This would then be used to produce 'a statement which blacks in this country will be able to read as coming from this committee presenting the true facts of the case and to end the kind of confusion that the press and the media is trying to create'.<sup>69</sup> Its work focused on the investigation of four theories: 'Forensic', 'Eyewitnesses', 'Gang Fight and Vomit', and 'Terror and Racial Motive'.<sup>70</sup> In order to investigate these theories, the FFC created a list of witnesses to be interviewed. Carl Knight, a young man who had left the party minutes before the outbreak of the fire, was their key witness. At the first meeting, at which the NCMAC and FFC were established, Knight had provided an account of what he saw as he walked from the house to New Cross station at around 5:45 am. Turning back towards the house to see if his brother was behind him, Knight saw a white man make a throwing gesture outside 439 New Cross Road; he heard the sound of a window smashing, and by the time he got back to the house, it was in flames. By this time, the man had got into a white Austin Princess, whose engine had been running throughout, before speeding off and nearly hitting Knight's brother.<sup>71</sup> The driver was later identified as the father of a police officer who was passing while on his way back from dropping his daughter off at Deptford Police Station. In his own testimony, the driver reported noticing the fire on his way home after taking her to work. He stopped and knocked on the door but did not tell the person who answered that the front room was on fire. Instead, he got in his car and returned to the nearby police station to report the fire.<sup>72</sup> Knight's account, supported by others who were making their way home, hoping to catch the first bus and rail services of the day, gained credence at that first meeting and in the investigation being carried out by the FFC because it seemed to confirm people's suspicions based on their experiences of being black in 1970s and 1980s London. The National Front, and neo-Nazi British Movement, had both been active in Lewisham throughout the preceding decade. The groups had carried out several arson attacks in the area and had engaged in violent clashes with

anti-Fascist demonstrators in the 1977 'Battle of Lewisham'. In response to the Black People's Day of Action, the National Front tried to hold its own protest march past the site of the fire.<sup>73</sup> Encounters with far-right racism – past and present – thus influenced how events surrounding the New Cross Massacre were understood, increasing the role of experience as a form of expertise.

The FFC's findings shaped the discourse of the campaign. In the lead-up to the first coroner's inquest, the NCMAC planned a series of demonstrations outside the Royal Courts of Justice and London's County Hall, where the inquest was to take place. The slogans which members of the NCMAC decided at a meeting on 8 April 1981 to use on banners for these demonstrations showed how the activists deployed their experiential expertise in opposition to anything other than a verdict of unlawful killing. In reference to the investigations carried out by the FFC, some read: 'petrol bomb positive' and 'arson positive, accident negative'.<sup>74</sup> While the FFC's investigations operationalized the history of racist attacks, especially those carried out in Lewisham, the evidence that racist hatred was still a force which threatened physical violence against black Britons was all too current for the families of the victims and leaders of the New Cross Massacre campaign. A series of letters which celebrated the deaths were sent, under the name 'Brian Bunting, White Man' and using a false return address, to the parents of the victims.<sup>75</sup> Bunting was believed to be a National Front organizer in Lewisham. Further letters were sent to leading figures which deployed offensive and racist language, called for violence against black Britons, and invoked the crime of 'mugging' which became the focus of a racialized moral panic in the 1970s.<sup>76</sup> While the question of whether the cause of the fire had been a racist attack remained open, as news of the letters spread, it was clear that racism continued to pervade black people's lives in Britain, and neo-Fascist organizations continued to operate in the area.<sup>77</sup>

The experiential expertise deployed by campaigners extended far beyond the eyewitness testimonies of partygoers. Proven cases of police misconduct – especially those involving black Britons and particular white police officers – were used as evidence to support their claim that the investigation into the fire was, at best, seriously flawed and, at worst, intentionally geared towards finding a 'black scapegoat'. The trial of the 'Mangrove Nine' (1970–71) and the murder of Michelle Confait (1972) demonstrated how accusations of police misconduct were built upon knowledge and experience of previous mishandlings and developed into a narrative of racist scapegoating. Darcus Howe, member of the NCMAC and the co-ordinator of its sections beyond London, was one of the Mangrove Nine, a group of black Britons who were prosecuted for causing a riot following a demonstration against police harassment of British Black Panther activists and the persistent raids of the Mangrove restaurant in Notting Hill where they met. Following a sustained political campaign and two-month-long trial, the nine were cleared of most of the charges and the judgement acknowledged 'evidence of racial hatred on

both sides'.<sup>78</sup> This official admission of racism within the Metropolitan Police Service thus provided further proof for activists in their claims that police officers were intentionally apportioning blame on the deceased party-goers, and the motivations for this were implicitly racist. The specific accusations levelled against the investigation, and cases cited, built on the longer history of problematic relations between the Metropolitan Police and black communities in London.<sup>79</sup>

Activists deployed the collective experiential expertise of London's black communities and their interactions with the police to rebuke Commander Graham Stockwell, the Metropolitan Police detective in charge of the New Cross investigation. Slogans carried by campaigners included: 'Stockwell's past makes this a farce'; 'Stockwell we are digging up are you giving up?'; and 'Stockwell came too late and framed Confait'.<sup>80</sup> This latter case, the 1972 murder of Michelle Confait, had particular resonance – though the placard itself reveals either a misunderstanding of the details of the case, or a slight misrepresentation in order to create a catchy slogan – and shows how New Cross activists presented the Confait case as one in which a black person had been intentionally maligned and denied justice by the police. In the police investigation and media coverage of their murder, Michelle Confait was identified as a mixed-race 'homosexual transvestite', born in the Seychelles under the name of Maxwell.<sup>81</sup> In the early hours of 22 April 1972, Confait's body was found in a locked room at a house in Catford, London. Confait had been killed by asphyxiation and the house in which they lived set on fire. Then Detective Inspector Graham Stockwell of the local Criminal Investigation Department played a leading role in the investigation, arriving at the scene of the crime within an hour of the fire being extinguished.<sup>82</sup> Early in the investigation, three young men aged between fourteen and eighteen – Colin Lattimore, Ronald Leighton, and Ahmet Salih – were identified as suspects after being observed by police in the area setting fire to patches of grass and wooden fence posts two days after Confait's murder.<sup>83</sup> The three were interrogated by Detective Chief Superintendent Alan Jones and Stockwell without any adult supervision and admitted to setting fire to the house; Lattimore and Leighton also confessed to murdering Confait, while Salih admitted to being present during, but not taking part in, the killing. After the police extracted these admissions, Lattimore and Leighton's parents were allowed in to witness a second confession, though at no point were any of the boys or their parents told at what time the killing and fire took place, and it later became clear that all three had alibis. Following a lengthy campaign by figures including MP for Lewisham West, Christopher Price, and a re-trial at the Court of Appeal, the three were acquitted in October 1975.<sup>84</sup> Though eighteen years old, Lattimore was said to have a mental age of eight, and this became a landmark case in shaping police interrogation practices, standards for admissible evidence, and the treatment of people with learning disabilities.<sup>85</sup> Stockwell's



role in such a high-profile and controversial miscarriage of justice thus called into question his leadership of the New Cross investigation.

While there were important parallels between the Confait case and the investigation into the New Cross Massacre, it was the police interview which became the focus of political and legal criticism. In the Confait case, the absence of a parent or other appropriate adult during the interviews led to false confessions being used to convict three innocent youths of murder. During the police investigation into the New Cross fire, questions were also raised about the police interviews of children and young people. Eleven-year-old Denise Gooding was accompanied during the interview by a local clergyman – as were other young people who attended the party – who attested that no pressure had been applied. However, this ran counter to the later testimonies given by the young partygoers after their release from the police station. Gooding, for example, later reported that she had been ‘kept in the police station for hours and hours and hours one night, just being questioned and questioned’.<sup>86</sup> Another claimed that he ‘was under curfew [on the night of the party] and liable to punishment and this was used as a threat or inducement for him to make a statement’.<sup>87</sup> Questioning the validity of the narratives which the police built around statements made by children and young people became a cornerstone of the legal campaign enacted by the NCMAC, the parents of the victims, and their lawyers in the British courts.

#### ‘NO BLACK SCAPEGOATS’: TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE LAW

In April 1981, the New Cross campaign moved from the street and community centre to the courts, changing the focus of the NCMAC from memorializing the victims of the fire in the face of state and media indifference, and demonstrating against police and societal racism, to challenging the injustices effected against black Britons and other marginalized groups through the judicial and carceral systems. On 8 April 1981, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) decided that there was ‘not sufficient evidence to justify proceedings against any person in respect of the [New Cross] fire’. Consequently, the coroner’s inquest offered the only opportunity to officially establish that the fire was the result of a racist arson attack. The inquest into the New Cross victims’ deaths, which the coroner for South London, Dr Gordon Davies, expected to last only four days, opened on 21 April 1981. This was a timeframe which both the police and DPP called ‘hopelessly unrealistic’.<sup>88</sup> Instead, it lasted nearly three weeks and exposed structural issues in the British legal system – especially in the coroner’s courts – which threatened the ability of political campaigners to hold the state to account, particularly in the event of controversial deaths. Through the judicial campaign, the NCMAC intersected with other campaigns to increase accountability following a series of legal injustices and deaths in state custody.<sup>89</sup> This larger campaign was built around a network of civil liberties campaigners, radical legal practitioners, and academics.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the systemic issues

highlighted by the New Cross inquest damaged public trust in the mechanisms through which the state established official truth in such cases. Even before these wider implications became apparent, London's County Hall, where the inquest was held, became a site where the New Cross campaigners, the families of the victims, and their legal representatives could use the experiential expertise built up in the months following the fire to question the version of events established by the police investigation. This was especially crucial in defending the reputations of the partygoers, some of whom died in the fire, against charges of physical violence and intentional arson which played out against a story of drunkenness, theft, and romantic jealousy.

The Metropolitan Police advanced an explanation for the fire based on witness testimonies which were retracted in court and forensic evidence which was subsequently shown to have been misinterpreted. It was a story which played upon the idea, perpetuated by right-wing politicians, of the West Indian house party as a site of disorder, and controversially this became the basis of the coroner's summation at the end of the inquest. The story began in the sound room on the first floor of the house, and a dispute between two romantic rivals. These two young men, and their friends, were reported to have gone downstairs and into the front room, which as a place for respectable adult entertaining had been out of bounds to the young people at the party.<sup>91</sup> It was in the front room that a fight broke out between this group of drunken young men. After the fight, several of the young men were said to have ransacked the front room, stealing jewellery and slashing the pouffes, emptying their contents out on the floor. To hide their vandalism and theft, they set fire to the room.<sup>92</sup> There were many problems with this story, not least, as the barristers at the inquest pointed out, the question of why Owen Wesley Thompson – who was cast as a violent individual and named as a likely arsonist within this narrative – would start a fire in the house, go back upstairs, and stay there only to die along with other members of the sound system.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the story became the focus of the coroner's summary of the case for the jury – at times, these statements were read verbatim from police witness statements. The barristers representing the parents called attention to this, admonishing the coroner for not having taken notes of his own, which they claimed was required by law, and instead relying on the evidence provided by one party, rather than the actual depositions made in the court. The depositions would have shown another story: eyewitness after eyewitness had refuted their written statements, claiming that they had been given under police pressure and the threat of either prosecution for existing charges or simply so as to be allowed to leave the police station, as in the case of eleven-year-old Denise Gooding.<sup>94</sup>

In his summary of the case before the jury retired to consider their verdict, the coroner declared that 'The righteous grief and concern of the relatives and the black population generally about this disaster made me decide on certain measures. Justice must not only be done but must be seen to be

done'.<sup>95</sup> The coroner offered four verdicts which were available to the jury: an arson attack from outside the party; an 'opportunist' arson attack, in which the assailant snuck into the house, possibly unseen, and started the fire before escaping; deliberate arson carried out by one of the partygoers inside the house; and an accident arising from events inside the house. After an open verdict – indicating that the jury could not reach a conclusion as to the cause of and responsibility for the fire but did acknowledge that the deaths were suspicious – the response of the parents and the activists made clear that justice had not been seen to be done.

In response to the open verdict, the NCMAC sought to leverage its members' transnational activist networks to establish an International Commission of Inquiry (ICI) into the cause of the house fire and conduct of the subsequent investigations. Though it never occurred, the ICI was, in effect, intended to hold the British state to account through an extrajudicial investigation which would place more weight on the experiential expertise of the witnesses than the police investigation or coroner's inquest had. The list of potential commissioners was wide-ranging and reflected the NCMAC's desire to include a diversity of opinion and experience, including local black workers, students, and a miner, if one could be recommended by Arthur Scargill. At one point, it was suggested that 'one of the Dimblebys' be appointed to raise the public profile of the commission, but this was rejected by Darcus Howe.<sup>96</sup> The ICI's reliance on eyewitnesses and the experiential expertise of the local community and black political activists also intersected with the technical expertise of some of the commissioners. These included Susan Craig, a sociologist at the University of the West Indies at St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, who was asked to chair the ICI; Phil Scraton, a white criminologist at the Open University working on deaths in state custody; and a representative of the *Radical Science Journal* to investigate the forensic evidence.<sup>97</sup> The commissioners' academic and technical expertise was seen as more reliable given their sympathetic politics. Moreover, although experiential expertise was a vital political and cultural tool, alone it had proven insufficient against the expertise deployed by the state throughout the judicial process. The inclusion of recognized technical and academic experts in the ICI was thus a tacit recognition of the limitations of experiential expertise in the justice system.

The ICI was postponed following a successful application to review the inquest in the Court of Appeal, which reopened the judicial route to establishing the cause of the fire.<sup>98</sup> While the ICI would have enabled the NCMAC to control the evidential basis upon which a verdict would be based, the judgement of the commissioners would have had no legal force and would serve, as had the conclusions of the Fact Finding Commission, as a narrative of truth accepted only by those politically sympathetic to the cause. The approval of the application to review the verdict meant that the Court of Appeal once again became a site in which legal and political campaigners could challenge not only the outcome of the first inquest, but the

ability of the coroners' courts to establish truth and effect justice.<sup>99</sup> While the parents' legal representatives, in their application to the court, did acknowledge that, based upon the evidence presented, the 'fight' theory was tenable – as was the theory that the fire had been caused by a racist arson attack – they claimed that the coroner 'failed to place similar emphasis' on any alternative narrative.<sup>100</sup> In effect, they suggested that the coroner had prejudged the case and led the jury accordingly. The application for judicial review also argued that the coroner, in summing up the evidence, should have included the testimonies given during the depositions rather than solely relying on the recanted police statements. Following their review of the inquest, the High Court justices acknowledged that there had been anomalies in the conduct of the inquest but found that 'such irregularities as there were did not impinge upon the fairness of the hearing' or 'offend the rules of natural justice'.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, the case exposed systemic issues which threatened confidence in coroners' ability to establish the truth, especially in controversial cases. Correspondence between the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Home Office, and the Greater London Council – which was initiated by a letter of complaint regarding the New Cross case sent by the legal campaign group, INQUEST – showed a lack of clarity in the ministerial oversight of the coroner's system. After the New Cross inquest, an increasing number of complaints were made against Gordon Davies and his deputy at the Inner South London Coroner's Court by bereaved families. However, the lack of any clear division of responsibilities between central government departments, and the impending dissolution of the Greater London Council hampered these agencies' ability to replace the coroner and reform the system.<sup>102</sup>

The complaints made against the Coroner for the Inner South London District were symptomatic of a wider crisis of confidence in the system for establishing truth in the event of suspicious deaths.<sup>103</sup> Similar complaints were made after the verdicts in inquests following the deaths of a number of individuals including Blair Peach (killed following an anti-fascist demonstration in 1979) and Colin Roach (who was found dead outside Stoke Newington Police Station in 1983). As a result, calls for fundamental reform of the system – including the option for an alternative route to the truth in such cases – began to be made in the national press.<sup>104</sup> In their critique of the New Cross fire inquest, Phil Scraton and Melissa Benn, academic researchers at the Open University, argued that as many such cases did not lead to a trial in criminal court, 'it is to the coroner's inquest that families and friends turn in order to have their complaints and allegations heard'.<sup>105</sup> The burgeoning crisis of confidence in the coroners' service demonstrated the inadequacy of a system which many people relied on to establish the truth in the event of controversial deaths. The New Cross inquest was not an isolated case, but symptomatic of structural inadequacies in the legal systems which threatened to perpetuate injustices.

## CONCLUSION

The New Cross Massacre campaign has continued, albeit with a lower public profile, for the nearly four decades following the failure of the inquest and judicial review to establish the true cause of the fire and provide justice for the bereaved families. To this day, the case remains unsolved. Nor have the emotional and psychological scars wrought by the fire disappeared. In July 1983, Anthony Berbeck, a young man who had attended the party as part of the sound system, took his own life. To escape the fire, Berbeck had jumped out of a second-floor window, spraining his ankle, but his mental health also suffered. For two-and-a-half years, Berbeck was in and out of hospital undergoing psychological treatment, but it was not enough to save his life. Berbeck's full name and all but the most intimate details of his mental illness are cited here as they are in the public domain following press coverage and an inquest into his death.<sup>106</sup> Naming Berbeck and including his experiences in the history of the New Cross Massacre is an important part of the cultural and political memorialization of the victims which began in the face of state and media indifference in the immediate aftermath of the fire. Since the late 1990s, a series of physical memorials have been installed at sites relating to the disaster and its victims – they all include Berbeck's name as the fourteenth victim. But the memorialization of the victims extends beyond physical plaques: the New Cross Fire Award was established by the Mayor of Lewisham and with the support of the New Cross Fire Parents Committee in 2006 to provide bursaries for young people to attend Goldsmith's, University of London; and more recently Jay Bernard has produced a volume of poetry as an artistic and affective response to the archive of the NCMAC held at the GPI.<sup>107</sup> Just as the New Cross campaigners deployed the experiential expertise of black British communities to castigate systemic racism and state violence, Bernard's collection, *Surge*, deploys the history of the New Cross Massacre as part of a critique of the state's response to the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017, in which seventy-two people died and many more were injured.<sup>108</sup> The injustices inflicted on those killed and bereaved by the New Cross fire continue to be perpetuated. In late 2020 the director Steve McQueen released his *Small Axe* film anthology. During the fourth film, following the story of Alex Wheatle's early years in south London, an interlude featuring images of the burned-out house and Black People's Day of Action, set to Linton Kwesi Johnson reading his poem 'New Craas Massakah', memorialized the disaster and acted as a further impetus for the 1981 Brixton uprising.<sup>109</sup> While a series of events marked the thirtieth anniversary of the fire in 2011, public commemorations for the fortieth are likely to take place online owing to the United Kingdom's third national lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>110</sup> Despite this, they remain a vital act of remembrance and resistance at a time when people of colour are often the ones bearing the brunt of the government's disastrous response to the disease.

The police investigation into the New Cross Massacre was reopened in May 1997, following a request by the MP for Lewisham Deptford, Joan Ruddock, on behalf of some of the families. After the publication of the Macpherson Report into the 1993 death of Stephen Lawrence and its finding that the Metropolitan Police service was ‘institutionally racist’, the renewed investigation became part of a wider reassessment of cases.<sup>111</sup> It found that the forensic evidence, upon which the police had developed their ‘fight theory’, had been misinterpreted. The seat of the fire was not in the middle of the front room, but at the chair by the window.<sup>112</sup> While many of the parents of the victims and some of the survivors of the fire had, by this point, accepted that the fire was probably not the result of a racist arson attack, the sense of injustice brought on by not knowing how their loved ones died continued.<sup>113</sup> The Coroner for Inner South London District, Selena Lynch, wrote to the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, asking whether he felt the case justified a public inquiry to look into the circumstances surrounding the fire more thoroughly than a second inquest could.<sup>114</sup> The suggestion was refused and, in 2004, a second inquest opened into the thirteen deaths at the house party. This too returned an open verdict.<sup>115</sup> In the absence of an officially and popularly accepted narrative, uncertainty remains. This uncertainty is replicated in the archive: the GPI holds the archive of the NCMAC. It contains the many stories of eyewitnesses and, within those testimonies, snapshots of the experiences of black Britons in their interactions with the police and carceral state. Conversely, much of the official record remains closed.<sup>116</sup> The implication of this archival silence is the continuing suspicion of the British state and its actions following the fire.

Through the collection created and made available by activists and archivists at the GPI, it is possible to see how campaigners responded to the state’s silence. Firstly, through the ongoing memorialization of the victims, not least through the construction of the archive itself. Secondly, by marching through the streets of London to assert their rights, tacitly denied by the government, as citizens. Finally, by deploying their experiential expertise to contest the formal, professionalized expertise upon which the state based official truths, and through which the families were denied the justice of knowing what caused the disaster. The experiential expertise upon which campaigners drew was varied, but shows how black British history – or, specifically, the history of anti-black racist violence in Lewisham and elsewhere – can provide a powerful political tool in the face of ignorance.

The tragic deaths of fourteen young people as a result of the house fire at 439 New Cross Road has cast a long shadow. Following decades of marginalization and injustice which afflicted the lives of black Britons, many were mistrustful of the narrative of events established by the state and media; these narratives did not accord with the experiential expertise of black communities and, in the case of the popular press, often simply repeated racist stereotypes. The New Cross Massacre thus also shows how, when trust in the state is eroded, truth and expertise become fundamentally contested. Similar

issues were prevalent in the aftermath of other late-twentieth-century tragedies, including the 1984 ‘Battle of Orgreave’ and 1989 Hillsborough disaster, in which the people affected were met with hostility from the popular press and obfuscation from the state. More research needs to be carried out on the potential interconnections between these seemingly disparate truth and justice campaigns during the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – most likely through the activism of radical law firms. It would be fruitful in terms of our historical understanding of the operation of, and resistance to, state violence. Mistrust also pervades the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower. At the time of writing, the public inquiry into the fire and the disastrous refurbishment which preceded it is still ongoing. However, the Grenfell Tower fire, and the state’s response to it, has once again thrown into relief the effects of decades of marginalization and the opacity of juridical processes which, when they fail to reflect and include the communities affected, feed concerns that truth and justice will not be achieved.<sup>117</sup> This is especially the case when repairing the public’s faith in governmental institutions is seen as the primary concern of the public inquiry, rather than effecting justice for the victims and bereaved. Over time, it may well become increasingly difficult for the state to use public inquiries in such a way owing to the continued erosion of trust. Working with communities to attain justice is liable to provide a much more effective means to engendering trust in the state in the long run. If people are to trust in the state and the truths it tells after tragic events, then the catalogue of experiences upon which people draw to frame their responses must inevitably change. How can the state expect people to trust in its institutions when individual and collective experiences, past and present, prove otherwise?

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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12 Paul Gilroy, *Ain't No Black In the Union Jack*, pp. xi–xii, 129–32.

13 Recent accounts include Eddie Chambers, *Roots and Culture: Cultural Politics in the Making of Black Britain*, London, 2017; and Carol Pierre, 'The New Cross Fire of 1981'. For a local history, see Joan Anim-Addo, *Longest Journey*, London, 1995.

14 See, for example, Caroline Bressey, 'Invisible Presence: the Whiteness of the Black Community in the Historical Imagination of British Archives', *Archivaria* 61, 2006, pp. 47–61; and her 'Looking for Blackness: Considerations of a Researcher's Paradox', *Ethics, Place & Environment* 6: 3, 2003, pp. 215–26.

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16 On the ethics of oral history, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (2010), second edn, Abingdon, 2016, pp. 175–94. A number of oral histories were recorded for a BBC programme and book in the late 1990s: see Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: the Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain*, London, 1998.

17 Papers of Jessica and Eric Huntley; and Papers of Sybil Phoenix: LMA/4463 and B08/211, both in London Metropolitan Archives (LMA).

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21 Nasar and Schaffer, 'The Poetics of Narrativity', pp. 1–25.

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24 Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, pp. 328–9; for a brief biography of Phoenix, see Joan Anim-Addo, *The Longest Journey*, pp. 156–9.

25 Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, p. 329.

26 Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, pp. 330–1.

27 Tony Douglas, 'Mass murder in Lewisham fire blaze', *Westindian World* 495, 23–29 Jan. 1981, p. 1; George Padmore Institute (GPI), NCM/4/1/1.

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29 Bunce and Field, *Darcus Howe*, p. 188.

30 Recording of Black Londoners with Alex Pascall, 19 Jan. 1981: GPI, LRA/09/01/02.

31 'John La Rose interview with Socialist Challenge, 17 June 1981', as published in La Rose, Johnson and John, *The New Cross Massacre Story*, p. 13.

32 Minutes of meeting, 20 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/1.

33 Anim-Addo, *Longest Journey*, pp. 141–2; Bunce and Field, *Darcus Howe*, p. 191.

34 Minutes of a meeting of the New Cross Fire Fund, 18 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/3/1/4/8.

35 Minutes of a meeting held on 21 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/2; Stephen Small, *Police and People in London, vol. II: a group of young black people*, London, 1983, p. 134.

36 Minutes of a meeting of the Fact Finding Committee, 21 Jan. 1981, p.1: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/1/5.

37 Minutes of a meeting of the Fact Finding Committee, 21 Feb. 1981: GPI: NCM/2/1/1/1/8.

38 *Westindian World* 498, 13–19 Feb. 1981, p. 3.

39 Letter to the Prime Minister, 16 Feb. 1981: TNA, HO 287/2992. The person is only identified as a 'clergyman' in the series of letters as their name has been redacted.

40 Memorandum, A. P. Jackson to Mike Pattinson, 20 Feb. 1981: TNA, HO 287/2992.

41 Draft letters of condolence, 24 Feb. 1981: TNA, HO 287/2992; Memorandum, A. P. Jackson to Mike Pattinson, 10 April 1981: TNA, HO 287/2992.

42 Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4: 1, 2003, p. 23.

43 Waters, 'Time Come', p. 839.

44 Black People's Day of Action poster, c. February 1981: London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), 4463/B08/02/004.

45 Organization for New Cross Black People's Day of Action, 23 Jan.–20 March 1981: GPI, NCM/1/2/1/1.

46 Co-ordination of march and code of conduct, 21 Jan.–2 March 1981: GPI, NCM/1/2/1/2.

47 The number of injured listed on these posters did not align with a list of the injured produced by the FFC which put the total at 25 injured, not including the subsequent fatalities; this likely reflects the early confusion about the fate of the young people at the party and the difficulty of acquiring information. See Allocation and payment of funds, 18 January–17 March 1981: GPI, NCM/3/1/4/8.

48 Black People's Day of Action poster, c. February 1981: LMA, 4463/B08/02/004.

49 On the cultural and political significance of reggae as a form of resistance, see William 'Lez' Henry, 'Reggae, Rasta and the Role of the Deejay in the Black British Experience', *Contemporary British History* 26: 3, 2012, pp. 355–73; and David Austin, *Dread Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution*, London, 2018, pp. 114–48.

50 Paul Du Noyer, 'New Cross: the Cause and the Effect', *New Musical Express*, 14 March 1981, p. 44.

51 Johnson, 'New Craas Massakah', *Making History*; Johnny Osbourne, *13 Dead (and Nothing Said)*, Simba Productions, 1981; Benjamin Zephaniah, '13 Dead', *Rasta*, Upright, 1983.

52 Nefertiti Gayle, 'Every Time Me 'memba' (no date) reproduced in Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, London, 1985, pp. 211 and 239.

53 Sir Collins, *New Cross Fire Page One*, Sir Collins Music Wheel, 1981.

54 Howe later claimed that his role in the Race Today Collective and the 1970–71 Mangrove Nine campaign (discussed below) meant that he 'was known in the country' and therefore suited to the task of overseeing the regional sections; see Bunce and Field, *Darcus Howe*, p. 195. For records of the regional sections see GPI, NCM/1/1/2/1 (Leeds Section); GPI: NCM/1/1/2/2, Leicester Section; GPI: NCM/1/1/2/3, Manchester Section; GPI: NCM/1/1/2/4, Rugby Section; and GPI: NCM/1/1/2/7, Regional General).

55 Several Rugby residents were present at the first meetings of the NCMAC in late January 1981, however the minutes of the Rugby section the following month suggest that little action had been taken in the town since. Minutes of meeting of the NCMAC, 21 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/2; and Meeting of members of the Rugby section, 16 Feb. 1981: GPI: NCM/1/1/2/4/2.

56 Gus John, *Taking a Stand: Gus John speaks on Education, Race, Social Action & Civil Unrest, 1980–2005*, Manchester, 2006, pp. 527–8.

57 Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, pp. 126–52.

58 Code of behaviour for stewards, February 1981: GPI, NCM/1/2/1/2/6.

59 Martin Kettle, 'The march of black outcast London', *New Society*, 12 March 1981, p. 456; on the significance of such spaces to political protest movements, see Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848*, Manchester, 2016, pp. 1–20.

60 Small, *Police and People in London, vol. II*, pp. 146–7.

61 'Day the blacks ran riot in London', *Sun*, 3 March 1981, pp. 14–15; 'When the black tide met the thin blue line . . .', *Daily Mail*, 3 March 1981, pp. 18–19; 'Baton police charge black mob', *Daily Star*, 3 March 1981, pp. 6–7.

62 'Black youths run riot during march', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 March 1981, p. 1.

63 'Lest We Forget: Black people remember the Massacre', *Westindian World* 501, 6–12 March 1981, p. 1; see also 'Day of dignity', *Lewisham Mercury*, 5 March 1981, p. 1.

64 'Thirteen dead – nothing said!', *Socialist Worker* 722, 7 March 1981, p. 1.

65 Vron Ware, Photographs of the Black People's Day of Action, 2 March 1981: *Autograph ABP* (2018) <http://autographabp-iadl.co.uk/artists/vron-ware/>, accessed 21 June 2019.

66 Minutes of a meeting, 20 Jan. 1981, p. 3: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/1.

67 On the sociology of expertise, see Harry Collins and Robert Evans, *Rethinking Expertise*, London, 2007.

68 Jennifer Crane, *Child Protection in England, 1960–2000: Expertise, Experience, and Emotion*, Basingstoke, 2018, pp. 2 and 161–85.

69 Minutes of a meeting to establish the Fact Finding Committee, 21 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/1/4.

70 'Theories to be investigated', n.d.: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/1/1. From the archival materials which are currently open, it is not clear what the term 'vomit' is in reference to; much of the FFC's investigation focused on disproving the 'gang fight' element of this theory.

71 Preliminary report of the FFC, 25 Jan. 1981, p.1: GPI: NCM/2/1/1/1/7.

72 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 18 (side 2)*, May 1981, pp. 1697–8: Inner South London Coroner's Court (hereafter ISLCC).

73 Amin-Addo, *Longest Journey*, pp. 121–35.

74 Minutes of a meeting of the NCMAC, 8 April 1981, p. 4: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/6.

75 Letter from 'Brian Bunting, White Man', c. 23 Jan. 1981: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/4/1.

76 Copies of these letters can be found in Correspondence considered racist or offensive, c. 1981: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/4. On the mugging crisis, see Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London, 1978.

77 See Gilroy, *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, pp. 130–2.

78 *The Times*, 17 Dec. 1971, p.5; on the politics and wider significance of the Mangrove Nine trial, see Waters, *Thinking Black*, pp. 93–124; and Kennetta Hammond Perry, 'History Beyond Borders: Teaching Black Britain and Reimagining Black Liberation', in *Black British History: New Perspectives*, ed. Hakim Adi, London, 2019, pp. 120–1.

79 James Whitfield, 'The Metropolitan Police: Alienation, Culture, and Relations with London's Caribbean Community (1950–1970)', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés* 7: 2, 2003, pp. 23–39.

80 Minutes of a meeting of the NCMAC, 8 April 1981, p. 4: GPI, NCM/1/1/1/6.

81 In this article I use Confait's chosen name, Michelle. This name (among others) was also used, with their birth name, in the judicial inquiry into the conviction of three young men for the murder. See House of Commons, *Report of an Inquiry by the Hon. Sir Henry Fisher into the death of Maxwell Confait*, HC 1977–78 (90), London, 13 Dec. 1977. In the absence of definitive knowledge of Confait's preferred pronouns, I use gender-neutral terminology.

82 House of Commons, *Report of an Inquiry of Henry Fisher*, HC 1977–78 (90), p. 33.

83 The young men are named here because the case is a matter of public record.

84 Christopher Price and Jonathan Caplan, *The Confait Confessions*, London, 1977; House of Commons, *Report of an Inquiry by Henry Fisher*, HC 1977–78 (90).

85 This led to the establishment in February 1978 of the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure; see Cmnd. 8092, *The Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure*, London, 1981.

86 Denise Gooding quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, p. 334.

87 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 19*, May 1981, p. 1723: ISLCC.

88 I. M. Jones, Memorandum to Mr Boys-Smith: the Deptford fire, 8 April 1981: TNA: HO 287/2992.

89 This includes deaths in police custody, prison, detention centres, mental health institutions, and psychiatric units; see Phil Scraton and Kathryn Chadwick, *In the Arms of the Law: Coroners' Inquests and Deaths in Custody*, London, 1986, p. 14. In their critical examination of the legal system's role in relation to deaths in custody, Scraton and Chadwick cited a number of other cases, including the New Cross Massacre, in which coroner's inquests had seemingly failed to establish the true course of events leading to a death. In May 1981, Scraton wrote to John La Rose of the NCMAC to offer his expert advice on coroner's inquests and legal injustice, leading to an invitation to join the International Commission of Inquiry; see Documents on Phil Scraton, Open University Lecturer in Criminology, 1981–83: GPI, NCM/2/4/2/1.

90 The lawyers hired to represent the parents of the New Cross victims at the first inquest were from B. M. Birnberg, 'one of the first radical law offices in the UK'. For a brief discussion on Birnberg's connections to other civil liberties and political campaigns, see Chris Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Cambridge, 2017, p. 133.

91 Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain*, Oakland CA, 2019, pp. 146–54.

92 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 18 (side 2)*, May 1981, p. 1,687: ISLCC.

93 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 19*, May 1981, p. 1,740: ISLCC.

94 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 19*, May 1981, p. 1,723: ISLCC.

95 *Transcript of the New Cross Inquest: tape 17 (side 2)*, May 1981, p. 1,648: ISLCC.

96 Minutes of the Fact Finding Commission, 23 Sept. 1981, pp. 1–2: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/1/12.

97 Minutes of the Fact Finding Commission, 23 Sept. 1981, pp. 3–6: GPI, NCM/2/1/1/1/12.

98 Pro forma letter sent to members of the International Commission of Inquiry, 28 May 1982: GPI, NCM/2/4/3/2; Letter from J. D. K. Burton (Honourable Secretary of the Coroners' Society of England and Wales) to William Whitelaw (Home Secretary), 20 Jan. 1982, p. 1: TNA, HO 287/2992.

99 Memorandum, N. M. Johnson to Mr Cooke re the Deptford fire inquest, 10 May 1982: TNA, HO 287/2992.

100 Attorney General's fiat with Judicial Review application, 13 May 1981–14 Feb. 1982, p. 4: GPI, NCM/2/3/1/1.

101 *R v South London Coroner, ex parte Thompson and others*. High Court of Justice Queen's Bench Division: No. DC/277/81. Judgement, 8 July 1982: TNA, HO 299/135.

102 These systemic issues, most importantly the ministerial oversight of the system and the ability to remove poorly-performing coroners were discussed at length in correspondence between the campaign organization INQUEST, the Home Office, and the Lord Chancellor's Office. See Complaint against Coroner Dr Gordon Davies in the Deptford fire inquest, 1981–84: TNA, LCO 65/498.

103 Ian Freckleton and David Ranson, *Death Investigation and the Coroner's Inquest*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 545–6.

104 Calls to reform the coroners service in light of a succession of controversial cases, including the New Cross fire, were made in a number of national publications: Martin Kettle, 'Another Brixton?', *New Society*, 3 Feb. 1983, p. 182; and Frances Gibb, 'Should coroners stay a law unto themselves?', *The Times*, 29 August 1984, p. 8. In November 1984, the Coroners Society also called for the reform of the service; Frances Gibb, 'Who's afraid of the coroners' verdicts?', *The Times*, 18 Nov. 1982, p. 1.

105 Phil Scraton and Melissa Benn, *After the fire – the inquest*, May 1981: GPI, NCM/2/4/1.

106 *Inquest into the death of Anthony Berbeck*, 17 August 1983: ISLCC.

107 Ruth Bush and Jay Bernard, *Beacon of Hope: New Beacon in Poetry and Prose*, London, 2016.

108 Jay Bernard, *Surge*, London, 2019.

109 *Small Axe: Alex Wheatle*, directed by Steve McQueen, BBC One, 2020, 00:45:12–00:48:58.

110 La Rose, Johnson and John, *The New Cross Massacre Story*, p. 80.

111 Joan Ruddock, *Going Nowhere: a Memoir*, London, 2016, pp. 179–80 and 255.

112 New Cross Fire Application for New Inquest, file 1, Letter from John Grieve (Metropolitan Police) to David Blunkett (Home Secretary), 13 June 2001: ISLCC.

113 New Cross Fire Application for New Inquest, file 1, Letter from George Francis (Chair of the New Cross Fire Parents Committee) to John Grieve (Metropolitan Police), 9 Nov. 2001: ISLCC. Also see Ruddock, *Going Nowhere*, p. 180; and Wayne Hayes quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, p. 338.

114 New Cross Fire Application for New Inquest, file 1, Letter from Selena Lynch (Coroner) to Jack Straw (Home Secretary), 9 May 2001: ISLCC.

115 *Inquest into the New Cross fire*, 6 May 2004: ISLCC.

116 For the nineteen closed files see: New Cross House Fire: charges considered for murder of Peter Campbell, Lloyd Hall, Humphrey Brown, Paul Ruddock, Andrew Gooding and eight others on 18 Jan. 1981 in London. No action case. With photographs, 1981–86: TNA, DPP 2/7456-7474. The author submitted Freedom of Information request to the National Archives for the release of the Director of Public Prosecutions files in April 2019. It was refused in July 2019. The decision will not be appealed.

117 See, for example, INQUEST, *Family Reflections on Grenfell: No voice left unheard*, London, 2019: <https://inquest.eu.rit.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=47e60cf4-cc23-477b-9ca0-c960eb826d24> accessed 23 Nov. 2020; and Patricia Tuitt, 'Law, Justice and the Public Inquiry into the Grenfell Tower Fire', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins and Nadine El-Enany, London, 2019, pp. 119–29.