

THROUGH THE WIRE

Black British People and the Riot

Eddie Chambers

No one knows why riots occur. Or, perhaps more accurately, no one knows when the precise confluence of factors will occur to spark a riot. After all, almost as a matter of routine, Black people have endured regular, almost mundane, violence and discrimination, both at the hands of society and the police. And yet riots involving Black people protesting against such violence are sporadic, rather than regular, events. Here I explore some of the ways in which press photographs have visualized key episodes of rioting involving Black people in the English cities of London and Birmingham. These range from the Notting Hill riots of 1958 through the riots that took place in Birmingham, Brixton, and Tottenham in 1985.

This text considers four wire photographs from the *Baltimore Sun*'s historical photo archive. Wire photos differed from traditional photographic prints insofar as the wire print resulted from breakthrough technology that allowed a photographic image to be scanned, transmitted over "the wire" (telegraph, phone, satellite networks), and printed at the receiving location. Opening here with a press photograph



A youth carries a firebomb on the second day of the Handsworth riots in Birmingham.
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of a group of Black youth overturning a large police van during the course of the Brixton riots of 1981, I argue that all of the photographs discussed shed light on the multiple challenges endured by generations of Black people in Britain, even as they have endured pronounced episodes of violence at the hands of individuals as well as the state. Considering the image of the lone petrol bomber participating in the Lozells, Birmingham, riots of 1985, I further examine the media-generated pathology of the Black bomber, forced to take his place alongside existing pernicious notions of the Black mugger and Black rapist.

LONDON. APRIL 11 (AP)—POLICE VEHICLE AT-TACKED—Black youth overturn a police vehicle in the Brixton area of South London, Saturday. In the second day of racial rioting in Brixton, ten policemen have been injured, one seriously, following renewed fight with hundreds of young blacks hurling bricks and gasoline bombs. (AP WIRE PHOTO) UNITED KINGDOM OUT

With this appended text, a news wire photograph was sent down a transatlantic telephone line from the London office of Associated Press to appear in the US print media.¹ The photograph was as dramatic as can be, depicting a group of young Black males (often referred to as “West Indians” by mainstream media) overturning a Ford Transit Black Maria, recently abandoned by the retreating police, who fled the immediate vicinity. The hapless, sorry vehicle is presented as a pitiful, wounded behemoth, its windshield smashed and gone and its headlights suffering a similar fate. And a press photographer captured the moment of the vehicle’s ultimate indignity, after it had gone well beyond any sort of saving, as the group, full of collective and youthful strength, sought to upend it. From any angle, it is an extraordinary photograph. Earlier, the police van had mounted the sidewalk, its driver perhaps having lost full control of it, and most certainly suggesting a preceding moment of high drama as police sought to contain whatever situation of urban unrest had recently erupted. In the photograph, located on Acre Lane, one of the main arteries of the South London district, the protruding shop signs point to the sorts of familiar establishments around which the scene

of violence and conquest is being played out. One shop has a Coca-Cola sign, while the one next door advertises itself as a restaurant, fully licensed. One or two properties along, just above the head of one of the young men, a Wall’s Ice Cream sign juts out. The scene is not one of exuberance. Nor is it in every respect a scene of great violence. Instead it depicts a group of young men (some of who appear to be wearing school uniforms) determined, quite literally, to *overturn* what they regard as an oppressive, tormenting presence in their lives, in their community, and in their midst.

For these youngsters, April 9, 1981, might have been just another day in Babylon, but April 10, as evidenced by this photograph, was to be decidedly different. Several months earlier, in January, a horrific incident occurred, shaping the mood and character of the year, at least as far as many Black people were concerned.² A suspicious house fire in New Cross, South London, not far from Brixton, claimed the lives of thirteen Black youngsters. With caution, one can advance the notion that this event contributed to the tension among Brixton’s youth on April 10, 1981, when their cup ranneth over.

This tragedy became known among many Black people as the New Cross massacre. The thirteen Black youngsters were attending a birthday party when the fire started. Mystery surrounded the cause of the fire, galvanizing the Black community, acutely increasing its sense of injustice, identity, and purpose. Among many Black people, at least, speculation was rife, pointing to the work of racist arsonists. Such arson attacks on the homes of people of African and Asian backgrounds were not uncommon in parts of London and elsewhere in the country. As Peter Fryer has noted, Deptford, where the tragedy occurred, was “an area where other black homes had been attacked and a black community center had been burned down. As usual, police discounted the possibility of a racial motive; but the entire community, not just the anguished parents, were convinced that the fire had been started by fascists.”³ In other quarters, an accident or the malicious work of a disgruntled partygoer were cited as possible causes of the fire. One thing, however, was certain. The aftermath of the tragedy threw into sharp focus an apparent widespread indifference shown to these (and indeed other) Black deaths by the mainstream

news media and important religious and political figures of the day. Even the Queen, as both reigning monarch and head of the Commonwealth, which included countries from which the parents of the thirteen dead had emigrated, declared no condolences for the bereaved. This comprehensive expression of indifference deeply offended many within the Black community.

Furthermore, any efforts made by the police to conclusively establish the cause of the fire or to apprehend possible suspects appeared to be disturbingly unconvincing, botched, and lackluster.⁴ Following the tragic events, there were, as mentioned, two months of screaming silence and perceived indifference from the monarchy, the prime minister, the heads of the established churches, the press, the media, and so on. In this context, the cry of “Thirteen dead, nothing said” was raised.

Accounts of what sparked the disturbances of April 1981 vary. To gravitate to one particular account over others, *you pays your money, you takes your choice*. Press and media reports, by their very nature, tended toward the partial and incomplete. In many instances, apocryphal stories or rumors of casual police brutality, meted out to allegedly delinquent Black motorists or, indeed, Black passers-by, were identified as prerequisite sparks. With that in mind, I reach here for the recollections offered first by Peter Fryer and then Andy McSmith. In his book *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Fryer claims that in the period directly preceding the Brixton riots, “120 plain-clothes policemen . . . in six days stopped 943 people in the street and arrested 118 of them. . . . They beat up a man outside a local school, and a parent who tried to remonstrate with them was hit on the head with a truncheon and arrested for obstruction. On 10 April a crowd rescued a black youth from a police car, then stood up to police reinforcements and forced them to withdraw.”⁵

In another publication McSmith takes up the story, describing such incidences as culminating in “a running battle [that] had developed along Railton Road, which lasted about half an hour, at the end of which six people had been arrested, six officers had been injured and four police vehicles had been damaged by flying bricks.”⁶ Subsequently, McSmith recalls:

Brixton went up in flames again. This time, it was not only bricks, stones and other debris being hurled at police; for the first time on the British mainland, the rioters threw petrol bombs. . . . As the police retreated down Mayall Road, the delighted rioters set fire to the vehicles they had left behind. “Up goes a cop’s van—wild cheers, laughter, dances of joy,” one participant recalled. In Railton Road, a local clergyman saw a group of “grimly determined” black youths invade the George public house and then the newsagent next door, wrecking both. . . . On that day, 279 police officers reported receiving injuries, at least 45 members of the public were injured, 61 private cars and 56 police vehicles were damaged, with most set on fire, 82 people were arrested and 145 buildings were damaged, including 28 that had been torched.⁷

In seeking to piece together the events and environment in which the Brixton riots occurred, we should also be mindful of the extent to which the residents of St. Paul’s—a predominantly Black inner-city district of Bristol, a city in the west of England—had participated in and witnessed a rehearsal of the South London disturbances, during the St. Paul riots in the spring of 1980. Violent skirmishes between police and Black youth were nothing new, but the St. Paul’s blueprint existed for others to utilize.

Assessing photographs of the Brixton riot, such as the one wired to news editors by Associated Press, we comprehend not only a day of reckoning but also a moment that reflected a coming of age for young Black Britain, another defining moment in its somewhat fractious relationship with the country of its birth and the “mother country” of its parents. In this regard, the dramatic photograph of one of the final ritualistic indignities—the upturning of the Black Maria—takes its place within a cluster of similar images, from other moments in time.

ARMED WITH AXE DURING LONDON RACIAL RIOT—A colored woman holds an axe as she stands talking to a newsman, right, in door of her home on Bard Road in the Notting Hill section of north-west London today. Two colored men stand behind her. Two iron bars and a flaming lamp were thrown through the window of her home while assorted objects broke other windows. Racial violence broke out in British capital tonight for the third night in a row,



A woman stands outside her front door with an axe, with her husband behind the door, after her house was attacked during the race riots in Notting Hill, London.
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Gangs of white youths stormed through Notting Hill and smashed windows of homes of colored people. (AP WIRE PHOTO) BY RADIO FROM LONDON

Dated September 2, 1958, this information accompanied a photograph taken at the height of the Notting Hill race riots of the late 1950s.⁸ Like many press photographs of rioting that were to be taken and disseminated in the decades to follow, this picture was particularly dramatic. As the accompanying text states, the picture depicts several householders being doorstepped by suited journalists.⁹ One Black gentleman's face is fully visible behind the woman with the axe, seeking to join his fellow householders. Understandably, his face bears a pained expression, reflecting perfectly the violence and misery that was recently visited, not only on the property and its occupants but also on the lives and homes of other long-suffering Caribbean immigrants of the area.

As mentioned earlier, to consider the alleged or apparent reasons why any given riot occurs is to enter a game of telephone, which is the sort of game that leads to riots in the first place. Like their children were to experience a generation later, Caribbean migrants of the postwar period, the *Windrush* generation,¹⁰ suffered widespread discrimination, together with violent harassment from pockets of the white communities in which they sought to settle.

The decade and a half following the end of World War II saw a marked increase in Caribbean immigration to Britain, as Caribbean people, desperate for work and keen to answer the call for labor, as issued by "the mother country," found their way to Britain. Then, as now, pronounced anti-immigrant sentiment percolated through much of British society, its political class and its media. To endless bouts of petty and decidedly harsher discrimination, Caribbean migrants were also on the receiving end of violence from the likes of white working-class "teddy boys"—countercultural hoodlums who were distinguished by the dandyism of their dress, their love for Black-derived rock-and-roll music, and most alarmingly in this instance, their propensity to inflict casual violence on people, including Caribbean migrants, with flick-knives and stiletto blades. These open displays of hostility toward the Black

householders in Notting Hill and other such areas in some ways were both compounded by and resulted from Nazi-inspired political groups, such as Sir Oswald Mosley's Union Movement, and other right-wing groups, such as the White Defence League, urging white Britons to "keep Britain white." Thus, Caribbean migrants found themselves under assault from various quarters, culminating in the violence that erupted in Notting Hill in 1958.

Peter Fryer has noted, "Stimulated by fascist propaganda urging that black people be driven out of Britain, racist attacks were by 1958 a commonplace of black life in London. On weekend evenings in particular, gangs of 'teddy boys' cruised the streets looking for West Indians, Africans, or Asians."¹¹

As also noted above, the precise reasons for the 1958 bouts of rioting are somewhat opaque, but one alleged cause has assumed the apocryphal quality alluded to earlier. That is an assault on Majbritt Morrison, a Swedish former sex worker, on August 29, 1958. She had been seen arguing with her Jamaican husband, Raymond Morrison, at a local tube station. Apparently, a group of white people attempted to intervene in the argument, leading to blows being exchanged between them and acquaintances of Morrison's husband.

The incident was said to have continued the following day, with a group of white youths assaulting Majbritt Morrison.¹² Some among the white British, male, inner-city population resented interracial relationships (in this instance, white women with black men) being openly conducted. Such antagonism significantly informed assaults on white women such as Morrison. And subsequent to that assault, the antiBlack rampage occurred, during which many teddy boys and others attacked the homes of Caribbean migrants. Such homes were often characterized by multiple occupancy, overcrowding, inadequate kitchen and sanitation facilities, and, perhaps the greatest indignity, extortionate rents. It was one such house that was depicted in the press photograph of the axe-holding matriarch.

By far the most fascinating aspect of the photograph is the matriarch's attire. She wears a voluminous skirt, decidedly Caribbean in its decor, depicting images resembling palm trees, sunny beaches, and the types of bountiful fruit grown in the Caribbean. The bright, optimistic patterning of her skirt

strikes a marked contrast to the axe that she casually, but determinedly, holds in her right hand. For good measure, it should be noted that she holds the axe as if poised to use it at any given moment. In other words, she holds it not halfway up the shaft, but at the lower end of the handle, enabling her to wield the axe to maximum effect, if called upon to do so. An equally dressy bonnet tops off her summery attire, thereby completing her arresting raiment. The unnamed woman presents herself as an unlikely, but formidable, protector of both her property and the lives of those with whom she shares her dwelling. While we are uncertain of which defensive weapons, if any, the two Black men hold, we can surmise that our formidable matriarch has taken control of the situation and is determined to brook no further nonsense, even as she fields questions from the doorstepping journalists.

*BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND, SEPT 10 (AP) An unidentified youth carrying a fire bomb approaches the riot torn area of Handsworth, Birmingham, England, Tuesday, as riot situation continues. (AP WIRE PHOTO) UNITED KINGDOM OUT 1985*¹³

In the late 1970s, the “inner-city” riot became, for young Black Britain, a new voice, a new form of expression. Armed with the weapons of the weaponless, “bottles and bricks and sticks,”¹⁴ some young Black males refused to yield territory—their territory—without a fight and gladly, willingly, shouldered the burdens that came with the self-appointed role of ghetto defenders. No single photograph epitomizes the black rioter better than a newspaper photograph of one such ghetto defender, described as a “prowling West Indian petrol bomber,” which appeared in a number of newspapers in September 1985. The lone youth pictured strides purposefully, confidently, righteously (some might say menacingly) with petrol bomb in hand, presumably identifying and approaching his quarry during the course of a riot in Birmingham, Britain’s second city. In framing the lone petrol bomber, the media, inadvertently perhaps, bestowed on him an almost iconic status, even as some regarded him as an affirmation of their worst fears. The Jamaican-born British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson elevated the status of these ghetto youth who, while enduring no end of discrimination,

were biding their time, and “measuring the time for bombs and for burnin.”¹⁵

As with other riots, including those discussed thus far, accounts of what sparked the disturbances of September 1985 vary. In this instance, apocryphal stories of casual police brutality meted out to an allegedly delinquent Black motorist were identified as causes of the violent events.¹⁶ In their book *Race, Politics and Social Change*, John Solomos and Les Back describe and contextualize the press image of the petrol bomber as follows:

The dominant newspaper image was a picture of a young black man carrying a lit petrol bomb. The picture . . . documented a skirmish that took place in the aftermath of a visit to Birmingham by the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd. The *Daily Express*, the *Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Observer* and the *Daily Mail* all used the photograph. The papers announced the arrival of the latest racial insurgent: He walks with a chilling swagger, a petrol bomb in hand and hate burning in his heart. (*Daily Telegraph*, September 11, 1985)¹⁷

Solomos and Back then quote a wholly fictitious account, which, in the manner of such reports, had rapidly assumed the status of irrefutable fact and chimed with dominant pathologies of violent, derelict, homicidal Black youth, to which images of industrious, entrepreneurial Asians provided a stark and noble contrast:

A black thug stalks a Birmingham street with hate in his eyes and a petrol bomb in his hand. The prowling West Indian was one of the hoodlums who brought new race terror to the city’s riot-torn Handsworth district yesterday. . . . Two Asian brothers screamed in agony as West Indian rioters beat them—and left them to burn alive in the petrol-bombed sub-post office. (*Sun*, September 11, 1985)¹⁸

As Solomos and Back reason, “The dominant theme of the reporting of these events suggested that a ‘race riot’ had taken place and that the death of the Moledina brothers was a result of tension between the African-Caribbean and Asian communities. This was despite factual details such as the presence of large numbers of whites and Asians on the streets who were arrested during this incident, and the fact that the person charged for the Molendina murders was in fact white.” Subsequently, the researchers



Cynthia Jarrett, who died while police officers searched her home in Tottenham, North London.
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summarize, “The ‘black mugger’ was surpassed by a new folk demon, the ‘black bomber.’ This shift not only associated black youth with crimes against the person but also crimes against society.”¹⁹

Undated file photo of Mrs. Cynthia Jarrett who died while police officers were making a search of her home in Tottenham, North London, on Saturday. Following this incident there were fierce clashes in North London Sunday night. One policeman was killed in the clashes. (AP WIRE PHOTO) UNITED KINGDOM OUT

On Saturday, September 28, 1985, Mrs. Cherry Groce, a Black woman, was shot and paralyzed during a police raid on her home in Brixton, South London, sparking another episode of rioting in the heart of the district. Allegedly, Groce was shot in her bed, by a member of a team of armed police officers who were looking for her son. Another, divergent, account has it that, “A team of armed officers went to the home of Mrs. Cherry Groce in Brixton, South London, to arrest her son, Michael, who was wanted for [allegations of] armed robbery. In fact, Michael Groce, no longer lived there. The officers smashed down the door with a sledgehammer and then an inspector rushed in shouting ‘armed police.’ Mrs. Groce says the officer suddenly rushed at her, pointing a gun at her. She tried to run back but he shot her. She is now paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair.”²⁰ On Sunday, October 6, 1985, just over a week after Mrs. Groce sustained her horrific injuries, Mrs. Cynthia Jarrett, another Black woman, died of a heart attack during a police search of her Tottenham home. (Again, allegations against her son lay at the center of this police action.) Though during the mid-1980s there were certainly many other such tragedies that spoke of a somewhat fractious or ill-at-ease Black British presence, the 1985 riots in Brixton and Tottenham, respectively, were certainly sparked by widespread accounts of these two acts or consequences of great violence, meted out to matriarchal Black women, who more often than not occupied reverential status, even among the most delinquent or disaffected of Black youth.²¹

By far, the most poignant image of those discussed is that of Cherry Groce—the only image of her that was circulated in the media in the aftermath

of her injuries, lifted from a wedding photograph. Taken several decades earlier, the cropped photograph shows Mrs. Groce as a bride, wearing her wedding-day finery. No other pictures of the hapless victim were available, recent or otherwise. The same could be said of the photograph of Cynthia Jarrett. Clearly taken at a smart social function, the photograph depicts Mrs. Jarrett in the cropped company of another Black woman. Both of them carry clutch handbags, which they hold in their left hands. Mrs. Jarrett can be seen holding a glass of red wine furiously in her right hand as she smiles for the camera. Elegant high-heeled shoes and a dress watch adorning the hand holding her handbag complete her dark-colored, sleeveless evening dress. With the relaxed pose of its subject, the picture is, in nearly every respect, fairly average, depicting a social scene enacted in countless hotels, homes, and community centers, literally thousands of times in any given year. In the wake of Mrs. Jarrett’s death, this private family photograph, like that of Mrs. Groce printed a week earlier, morphed into a press and media photograph—turning the private into the public, in the most unexpected and unfortunate of ways.

The press photographs briefly discussed here in so many ways reflect how Black people tend to get framed, or positioned, within the wider society. The dominant societal significances of Black males in particular (as evidenced in some of these images) are very much constructed around notions of violence and deviance. And yet some of these images also speak of altogether different sensibilities, such as resistance, fortitude, and (in the case of the portrait of Cynthia Jarrett) an everyday humanity, seemingly seldom recognized by the state or the society.

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Notes

- 1 As mentioned in the introduction, the photographs looked at in this text were all used by the *Baltimore Sun*.
- 2 For an account of the tragedy, see Cecily Jones, “New Cross Fire,” *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones (Oxford University Press, 2007), 341–342. See also John La Rose, *The New Cross Massacre Story: Interviews with John La Rose* (London: New Beacon Books, 2011).
- 3 Peter Fryer, “The New Generation,” in *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 398.
- 4 Over a decade later, similar accusations would be leveled against the metropolitan police for its handling of, and response to, the racist murder of Black Londoner Stephen Lawrence. For more on this, see Brian Cathcart, *The Case of Stephen Lawrence* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000).
- 5 Fryer, “The New Generation,” 398.
- 6 Andy McSmith, “Inglan Is a Bitch,” in *No Such Thing as Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London: Constable, 2011), 93.
- 7 McSmith, “Inglan is a Bitch,” 94–95.
- 8 For an account of the disturbances, see Cecily Jones, “Notting Hill Riots,” 346–347. For an account of the tragic events that followed these riots some months later, see Mark Olden, *Murder in Notting Hill* (London: Zero Books, 2011).
- 9 To be *doorstepped* by journalists means they come to your house and ask you to speak or answer questions, even if you do not want them to.
- 10 The *Windrush* was a merchant vessel that carried the first group of Caribbean migrants who made their way to Britain after the Second World War, numbering some five hundred or so. Over the course of the following decade and a half, other Caribbean immigrants followed them. In this respect, the arrival of the *Windrush* signaled the beginning of a particular transformation of Britain, and in particular, neighborhoods such as Notting Hill, where the events surrounding the photograph under discussion played out.
- 11 Fryer, “The New Generation,” 378. In this passage he details additional episodes of pronounced violence visited upon Black people during this period, in Notting Hill and elsewhere.
- 12 For a fascinating book-length recollection of her life, including the events referenced here, see Majbritt Morrison, *Jungle West 11* (n.p.: Tandem Books, 1964).
- 13 The media was fond of identifying the “Black” district of Handsworth as the location of Birmingham’s 1985 riots. In reality though, the riots took place in the Lozells neighborhood of the city, a district that while decidedly multicultural in its makeup, resisted media caricaturing as a Black district.
- 14 Linton Kwesi Johnson, quoted from “All Wi Doin Is Defendin,” on *Dread Beat an’ Blood*, Front Line Records / Virgin Records Limited, 1978, the first long-playing record of poetry released by this British, Jamaican-born poet, under the name Poet and the Roots. See *Wikipedia* for a discussion of Johnson’s position on the riot as an act of defense by the black youth of Brixton, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dread_Beat_an%27_Blood, accessed October 13, 2013.
- 15 Linton Kwesi Johnson, quoted from “Bass Culture,” the title track of his long-playing record, Island Records, 1980. In 1976, during the course of the annual Notting Hill festival, violent street battles erupted between Black youth and the police. But it was the rioting in St. Paul’s, Bristol in 1980 (plus major eruptions the following year in Brixton and elsewhere) that emphatically declared the arrival of the dissatisfied urban-dwelling ghetto youth. These were heady days. This period, including the late 1970s and early 1980s, was one of the most politically, culturally, and racially charged periods in Black British history.
- 16 For references to the 1985 riots and their causes, see *Handsworth Songs*, a film made by the Black Audio Film Collective, London, directed by John Akomfrah, 1986. See also Eddie Chambers, “‘Handsworth Songs’ and the Archival Image,” in *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists’ Film and Video* (Bristol: Picture This, 2006), 24–33.
- 17 John Solomos and Les Back, *Race, Politics, and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1995), 81–82.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Times*, January 16, 1987, quoted in *Policing against Black People* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1987), 26.
- 21 As referenced on the wire photograph, it was during the “rioting” on the Broadwater Farm estate, sparked by news of Mrs. Jarrett’s death, that P. C. Blakelock was isolated from his fellow police officers and set upon and killed by what was commonly referred to at the time, in the press and media, as a “mob.” For a discussion of these riots, see David Rose, *A Climate of Fear: Blacklock Murder and the Tottenham Three* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992). For more on the Broadwater Farm riots, see the entry “Broadwater Farm Riots,” in *The Oxford Companion to Black British Culture*, 71–72.