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Schaffer, Gavin; Nasar, Saima

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Black lives and the ‘Archival pulse’: the murder of neil “Tommy” Marsh and other stories

Gavin Schaffer^a and Saima Nasar^b

^aHistory Department, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; ^bHistory Department, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

16-year-old Neil ‘Tommy’ Marsh was murdered in the Birmingham Pub Bombings. A recent immigrant from Jamaica, Tommy came to Britain to join his family in Handsworth. Now he is the only 1 of the 21 pub bombing victims for whom there is not a single photograph. When pictures of the other victims are displayed, Tommy is represented by a silhouette, or by an image of his mother in mourning at his grave. The absence of material to document Tommy Marsh’s life in Britain speaks to a deeper lacuna of Black British lives within government records, mainstream public accounts and even public histories. Where records of Black lives exist, they are frequently built from foundations of Black people’s encounters with the state, perpetuating structural racism through white recordings of Black lived experiences. This article will use Tommy Marsh’s case to question how the fragmented documentary and community archives of Black life in Britain offer methodological insights into history as/and recovery. It will discuss the extent to which it is possible to construct historical narratives of Black life that acknowledge and speak from that for which government and public records fail to provide an account. Drawing from the work of scholars including Michel Rolph-Trouillot, Saidiya Hartman and Ann Laura Stoler, we will interrogate the processes of archival production and offer a critical examination of archives produced in the aftermath of injury, violence and death. We question the potentials and limitations of the spaces that can be mined by historians, and how appropriate they are for the production of historical knowledge. In doing so, we probe the extent to which alternative archives curated at the individual, family and community level may potentially support the recovery of the histories of Black British communities and individuals. ry.

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Scobie’s (1972) foundational text *Black Britannia* was one of the first historical accounts of the Black experience in Britain. Scobie

CONTACT Saima Nasar  saima.nasar@bristol.ac.uk  University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

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studiously traced histories of immigration, discrimination and race relations. The Dominican-born writer concluded that Black Britons were living within a 'racial straight jacket, with the weight of social and economic strictures still bearing heavily on them' (Scobie 1972, vii-viii). As was later corroborated by influential scholars such as Shyllon (1977) and Fryer (1984), Scobie found that Britain's Black communities historically faced racial exclusion, state violence, and social, political and economic inequality.¹ In the post-World War Two period, when there was a profound shift from a smaller Black British population to settled and substantial communities, racism became, according to Fryer, 'institutionalised, legitimised and nationalised' (Fryer 1984, 381). Fryer observed that by 1968 attacks on Black people 'far from diminishing, mounted from year to year' (ibid). In this environment, a host of Black men lost their lives in violent attacks: Kelso Cochrane, Rolan Adams, Stephen Lawrence and Michael Menson to name just a handful. Tommy Marsh, the individual at the centre of this study, may well be added to this dreadful list, even though he was not, as we shall see, targeted for attack in the same way as these other young men.²

In the shadow of long-standing social and political exclusions experienced by Britain's Black communities, scholars of race have encountered obstacles when attempting to read the narratives of deep and nuanced lives within shallow historical archives. While it would be a mistake to claim that Black Britons are entirely absent in government or public accounts, the historical recovery of Black British life poses challenges.³ As the names of the dead listed above indicate, when Black lives enter traditional archives used by historians – i.e. in newspaper material or court and government records – it tends to be at moments of extreme crisis and violence, as an act of mourning after yet another fatal incident of racism. Traditional archival transcripts of this kind are not, after all, neutral or uncontested sites: silences are built into the very processes of archival production when these documents are composed, deposited and stored.⁴ As Thomas et al. note, 'the absences of records from public view, or the absences of records altogether remind us that silences are often laden with power' (Thomas et al. 2017, xv). What is preserved, recovered and afforded historical attention is thus subject to unequal power relations. Nowhere is this more evident than in archives of official documentation relating to Britain's racial minorities.

Historians of Black Britain frequently encounter absences in government and public history records, and when traces of Black British lives do

exist, they are often fragmentary, partial and contingent.⁵ This in turn reflects gross inequalities of power within epistemes of the past. Commenting in 2018, the journalist and writer Younge (2018) noted:

For the longest time the central distraction for black Britons was insisting on our existence . . . Britain, we were told, was an essentially white place in which we had only just arrived. We had no history here . . . But the notion that we could be black and British, both from this place and in our bodies, confounded many, if not most.

Younge's comments demonstrate the effects of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has described as the 'entanglements of historicity with power that applies not only in the archives but also dominates the processes and practices by which pastness is authenticated, ratified and organized into fields of knowledge' (201, xii). In other words, unequal structures of power reinforce historical narratives that serve to contain and silence. This, subsequently, raises many interlocking questions: has (or how has) Black British life been documented differently to that of white Britons? Where do the histories of minority communities fit within majority-dominated histories of modern Britain? How might professional historians, community organisations and committed volunteers seek to recover the histories of those deemed at the margins of British social and political life?

Of course, we are not the first historians to come to such questions. Scholars of race have established pathways of utilising creative, interdisciplinary methods to record narratives that have oftentimes been neglected.⁶ Trouillot's own *Silencing the Past* paved the way for historians to reflect critically on the ever-present racial power relations that shape what is remembered (the American revolution) and what is ignored (slave revolts and the Haitian Revolution). Likewise, Hartman (2008), in her timely historical analysis of Black women and slavery, has advocated the use of 'critical fabulation' – a process of closing gaps in the archives by re-presenting events from contested points of view and thus displacing received or authorised accounts.⁷ Moreover, there has been a long and rich tradition of community-led and community-engaged histories in Britain that have sought to centre Black narratives both outside and within the academy. As Naomi Oppenheimer has observed, Scobie was part of an established Caribbean publishing tradition which was engaged in reparative history: his work was indicative of a 'wider phenomenon where Black knowledge production occurs (and continues to occur) outside of the academy from which it has so long been excluded' (Oppenheimer 2019, 138). From the publication of the West Indian

Gazette and Afro-Asian World in the 1950s and 1960s, to the creation of networks such as The Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA) and the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), a matrix of community historians, independent scholars, archivists and heritage organisations have led the way in tapping into the multiple registers of historical consciousness.⁸ In so doing, they remind us that history is not the prerogative of the professional historian. Instead, as Samuel (2012) noted, the constitution of historical knowledge is underwritten by social relations. ‘Unofficial knowledges’, located outside formal academic spaces have indeed created new and important pathways in writing and recovering Black British histories. As Bressey (2020) has shown, thoughtful engagement with community-based scholarship and the alternative archives they produce challenge the complex hierarchies that traditionally exclude minorities groups from traditional archival spaces.⁹

Building on this tradition, this article considers what a partnership between professional historians and community engaged historical actors can tell us about the life and afterlife of Tommy Marsh, a victim of the 1974 Birmingham Pub Bombings. The authors of this article began working on histories of memory and trauma connected to the Birmingham Pub Bombings in 2014. We worked alongside community organisations, heritage groups, migrant welfare support associations and counselling groups on a wide-spanning community and oral history project.¹⁰ Tommy was 1 of the 21 victims who lost their lives on 21 November 1974, yet his story has frequently been set aside in public retellings of the Birmingham Pub Bombings. Accordingly, we seek to understand the agency exercised in the historicization of Black male lives in postwar Britain. We reflect on the challenges in recording the lives of first-generation migrants, adjusting to new environs, making sense of their diasporic realities. We set out to challenge the assumption that those at the margins of historical record keeping must be left in silent obscurity. We begin the interpretive work of understanding their lives and histories by reflecting on the lessons that can be learnt through processes of historical co-production. To do so, we have, of necessity, moved away from traditional sources such as government and court records, and mainstream public accounts found in newspapers and other public spaces, and instead sought out family and community histories which find ways to represent Black lives and confront the painful legacies of erasure in official archival spaces. We draw on our long-term engagement with community partners to reflect on an alternative archive of material that sits in parallel but rarely in conversation with dominant narratives of

the Birmingham Pub Bombings. Here, as historians, we acknowledge that we do not hold the answers, but instead respond to new questions, alongside community stakeholders, families and creative industries. Within this model of working, the generation of questions and the mechanisms of response are not dictated by academics, who instead facilitate a more open discussion aligned with the priorities and interests of the communities involved.

In this article, we discuss the extent to which it is possible to construct historical narratives of Black life that acknowledge and speak when government and public records fail to provide an account. As Perry (2015) has demonstrated, by necessity a range of conventional archival records as well as alternative historical texts can be used to represent perspectives not readily available in 'official accounts'. In other words, as historians we can mine alternative archives produced within communities as legitimate and important sites of historical knowledge. We therefore follow anthropologist Stoler (2017) in her quest to find the archival 'pulse' in the agency of individuals, family members and creative expressions. This 'pulse', we argue, is located beyond traditional documentary or public history accounts. It is found, as Stoler observes, between documents, institutions and memory: it is both a place and a cultural space.¹¹ This is because the case of Tommy Marsh demonstrates how Black lives are visible in texts that exist in 'critical fabulations': in re-presentations found in writings, memories, community histories and the gaps and silences they leave behind (Hartman 2008). As such, we argue that we must understand archives, in the words of Stoler, not as 'things' but as 'epistemological experiments'; not at sites of 'knowledge retrieval' but as a series of 'knowledge production' (Stoler 2002, 87). Here, historians cannot work alone. Only through co-production, between ourselves as academic historians and community partners, families and creative practitioners, can new stories come to the surface and the process of recovery begin.

The murder of Tommy marsh

The people who lost their lives in the Birmingham Pub Bombings of 1974 have in recent years been remembered collectively as 'the 21'. Aligning with the culture of naming that brought together the victims of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster of 1989 as 'the 96', the collectivised referent, 'the 21', has enabled shared campaigning for justice, and empowered a community of support and grieving. As the primary

campaigning body for the victims of the pub bombings, which strives for the conviction of their murderers, *Justice 4 the 21* embodies this culture. Instead of each individual or family going their own way, *Justice 4 the 21* pools resources and energies for otherwise potentially isolated individuals and families. For some families, it has created a community of victims and supporters.¹² Given the exhausting, frustrating and upsetting nature of their long-fought campaign, the unity offered by *Justice 4 the 21* makes obvious sense. In the absence of justice, sharing the burden of its pursuit offers purpose and community, and even the potential for healing (Saul 2014).¹³ As Jack Saul puts it, 'collective trauma requires collective responses' (Saul 2014, 183). A group like *Justice 4 the 21*, on these terms, offers steps towards civic acknowledgement and can 'provide a profound sense of universality' to victims, validating feelings and lending 'a kind of formality and ritual solemnity to individual grief' (Herman 2001; November 25, 1974, 221–228).

The creation of community in response to trauma shares out the burdens of restitution and offers solidarity to those who desperately need it. Its impact on history making, on social understandings of the pub bombings and their aftermath, is similarly powerful. Collectively, sense is made of the events back then, and specific narratives brought to the fore. For *Justice 4 the 21* and their supporters, the history of the Birmingham Pub Bombings is understood most frequently in terms of the failure of the British police and government to bring perpetrators to justice, a failure explained in terms of incompetence, indifference and possible complicity. As Julie Hambleton, one of the campaign's primary activists (who lost her sister Maxine in the bombings) told us, 'the campaign came about on the back of my anger towards [the Chief Constable's] incompetence and his contempt towards us. And our loved ones who aren't here to fight for themselves' (Hambleton, 2015). Here, 'the 21' collectively are constructed as innocent people let down, people whose families, and entire communities, have been forced to live with the aftermath of governmental failure to respond appropriately to terrorism and the victims it creates. In resistance, the campaign sets out on their behalf to achieve 'truth, justice and accountability. No more, no less' (Hambleton, 2015).

This article does not wish to undermine this rendering of the Birmingham Pub Bombings, or the aims of *Justice 4 the 21*. As historians, but also as fellow citizens of Birmingham, we have co-travelled with the victims' families for many years. We have recorded oral histories, conducted witness circles, supported campaigns and accompanied them on

their quest for justice and reconciliation in Britain and Ireland. On these terms, we have diminished our academic distance in favour of compassionate and consistent engagement, which at times has involved stepping away from academic questioning (at least for certain periods) and standing as fellow citizens.¹⁴ This has not felt like a choice, so much as a gradual but inevitable consequence of co-working over many years, one which has led us to a different space and role. From this new vantage point, we want to consider the power and effect of the families' important quest for justice on other narratives that might have been lost along the way. We want to make the case that the instinct to collectivise the experience of the Birmingham Pub Bombings in terms of 'the 21' generates historical silences just as it nurtures the memory of the 21 people killed. Well-meaning and ostensibly inclusive as it may be, the collective '21' only opens part of the pub bombings story. There will inevitably be, as Dominic La Capra has put it, 'divided legacies' in the wake of trauma, so that one person, one group, one descriptor, inevitably cannot always speak for/or about the totality of the bombings as history (LaCapra 2001, 45). *Justice 4 the 21* is in essence not (or at least not primarily) Justice for the 200 (the injured in the bombings) or Justice for Birmingham, Irish Birmingham, or anything else. On these terms, Saul's question and response seem pertinent: 'What is the collective narrative? Who puts it together? The community's story should create a space for everyone, yet at the same time it will never be everyone's story' (Saul 2014, 133).

Even within the boundaries of 'the 21', we argue, certain histories have been less explored, relegated to the margins by the overwhelming case of the collective, which, ultimately, foregrounds the stories of those who are best able to articulate the pub bombings experience on behalf of the whole. For others, it remains difficult to 'place the experience into narrative form', a reality which diminishes their 'ability to manage' the trauma of their loss (Jackson cited in Denham 2008, 408). This article focuses on one such case, that of Neil 'Tommy' Marsh. One of two Black British victims of the pub bombings, Tommy's story is little known. The collective, diverse as it is in many senses (ethnicity, gender, nationality and age), does not instinctively have space for a story about racism, or Black Britons and the justice system. And yet, in its midst, there are just such stories to be told.

Ostensibly, racism played little part in the murder of Tommy Marsh. Unlike so many other well-known famous cases of murdered Black individuals in twentieth-century Britain (such as, Charles Wootton, Kelso Cochrane, Stephen Lawrence and David Oluwale), Tommy's

Blackness played no obvious part in sealing his fate as a victim of the pub bombings. Like the rest of the murdered 21, Tommy's death was largely indiscriminate. Nonetheless, Tommy Marsh died a Black youth in 1970s Britain, and his Blackness is, we argue, highly significant to all that has happened since his murder (and much before). Through this lens, there is a different story to be told, one which for a moment re-focuses our thinking about the Birmingham Pub Bombings and situates Tommy as a casualty outside (as well as inside) 'the 21'.

Tommy Marsh arrived in Britain in 1967 to join his mother, Hilda Turner. She, like many other post-war Caribbean migrants, had initially left her son behind in Jamaica when she moved to Britain, needing time to establish herself as a nurse and set up home. Having completed her studies at City Hospital in Birmingham and secured employment, Hilda sent for 10-year-old Tommy, who flew over to join her and her new husband in Handsworth (Interview with Hilda Turner with Gavin Schaffe, 2019). Nearly seven years later, Tommy, on the threshold of his seventeenth birthday, was killed in the Birmingham Pub Bombings alongside his friend Paul Davies by the bomb planted in the Mulberry Bush pub, in the basement of the Rotunda building. As the blast blew out of the basement pub's entrance it sent shrapnel flying into the street, killing both Tommy and Paul who were in the vicinity, outside. Tommy and Paul were the only victims outside the two targeted pubs, and Tommy the youngest victim. Later that night, police visited Hilda at home. She recalls:

... afterwards the police came, and they said "bad news. You have a son by the name of Neil Robert Marsh", I say yes, he says "I'm sorry. He got killed" ... After that now, they knocked me out, they give me a strong drink (Turner , 2019).

Tommy was buried in Handsworth cemetery on the 5 December 1974, and his family were left to their shattered lives (*Birmingham Mail*, 6 December [December 2, 1974](#)). Hilda remembers: 'Nobody want to talk to you and say this and say that ... and I was in a shock so, you know, they didn't want to bother me that much' (Turner , 2019). In the local and national press, stories of the dead and wounded were soon replaced with coverage of the prosecution of the Birmingham Six, and then faded from public view.¹⁵ In this article, however, we want to question the extent to which the handling of Tommy's murder, and the way that it has been remembered, has been similar to the other victims. What did it mean for Paul Davies and Tommy to be Black victims of the



Figure 1. BBC Website, 2019: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-47405130>. (Accessed 02/04/23).

pub bombings? Are there reasons to look at these cases through the lens of race, and what might such a reading yield in terms of our understanding of what happened in the aftermath of the pub bombings?

Such an analysis is prompted by an immediate and stark difference between Tommy and the other 20. For he is the only victim for whom there is not a single photographic image. In the many photographic renderings of the 21 (shown in Figure 1), Tommy appears simply as a silhouette, a man whose living image cannot be recovered, seemingly lost to history for good.¹⁶

Visibility

Visual archives have offered an illuminating entry point for research on Black British lives.¹⁷ As Hall (2007) reminds us, photographic collections, such as those presented in photo-journalism magazines like *Picture Post*, serve a wider canvas of everyday social life, offering a basis for deeper interpretive readings from the multi-accentual ways in which they can be evaluated. Indeed, Hall and Back's (2009) work with the Institute of International Visual Arts' and Autograph ABP demonstrated the acute historical sensibility of photography, which he argued could be used to rethink the history of Black Britain.¹⁸ It is possible then, as Tinkler (2013) has observed, to interpret photographs as texts and to interrogate them as evidence of the social and material worlds they depict. In post-war

Britain, photography has increasingly been drawn upon both to record and reveal injustice. Community groups and activists have used images as a form of ‘vernacular photography’ in that images have been employed to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of Black British experiences.¹⁹ Camp’s (2012) work, for instance, has shown how family photography can be understood as a dynamic site of Black cultural formation. In this way, photographs arguably serve to mark presence, nowhere more so than in Birmingham, where the work, over many generations, of photographers such as Vanley Burke, Derek Bishton and Pogus Caesar has served to make visible British Black communities and cement their place in the local landscape.²⁰

In *London is the Place for Me*, Perry demonstrated the ways that Black Britons have historically used ‘photography and technologies of portraiture as a tool to both chronicle their hopes as well as to create a vision of full citizenship and incorporation within the nation’ (Perry 2015, 131). This was certainly the case during moments of crisis and threat, such as in campaigns to raise awareness of 32-year-old West Indian carpenter Kelso Cochrane’s brutal murder in 1959. Cochrane’s death was a pivotal political event in the history of post-war Britain. Black activists, including the inimitable Claudia Jones and Amy Ashwood Garvey, stood alongside grassroots organisations like the Committee of African Organisation to call on the public and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to address racial violence and the steady erosion of Black Britons’ citizenship rights. The image of Cochrane, showing a well-dressed, bespectacled man, provided a visual aid that offered not only a face to a name but also a way of seeing the life and experiences of West Indian communities in Britain (Perry 2015, 132). The photograph, alongside the British Pathé video of his well-attended funeral, thus functioned to subvert racist narratives of the ‘colour problem’ in Britain.²¹

Other examples of ‘vernacular photography’ can be found in the Black press. When state responses to incidences of racial violence were deemed discriminatory, and at times wilfully neglectful, community organisations, often foregrounding powerful photographic images, mobilised the ‘alternative’ press to campaign for social justice. *Flame*, the ‘Black Workers Paper for Self-Defence’ (shown in Figure 2), alongside *Grass Roots* (shown in Figure 3), a newspaper for ‘Black Community News’ filled its pages with these cases. These forms of representation played an important role in imparting ‘affective knowledge’ – that is, knowledge that moves people to feel or act.²²

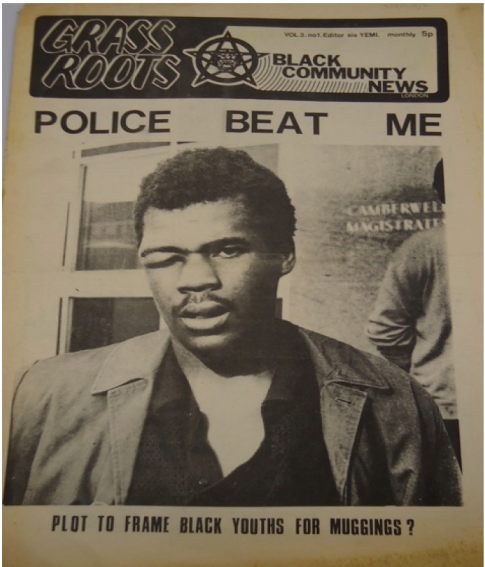


Figure 2. Warwick Modern Records Centre, MSS. 217/B12/3: ‘Black groups material’: miscellaneous publications, 1970–1972.



Figure 3. Warwick Modern Records Centre, MSS. 244/2/5/9: Race Work ‘1973–1979’.

Photographs are, therefore, more than just evidential documents. They imbue and communicate social, cultural and political meaning. Paul Gilroy describes them as ‘fragments of an unfinished history’ (Gilroy 2007, 7). But how do we make sense of an unfinished history – that of Tommy Marsh – without a photograph?

As photographs offer a materiality – and hence a significance and permanence – the absence of Tommy’s photograph from the history of the pub bombings marks the absence of even the smallest of glimpses into his social world²³. This renders his case difficult to pick up, even within the ‘normal’ channels of resistance and opposition. Whereas his friend Paul Davies is more easily remembered through his photographic image, a tall, slight youth wearing the symbol of Black Power on his hat, we know very little about Tommy. This has contributed to greater silences in the public narrative of Tommy’s victimhood in the pub bombings.

For many years, the family and friends of ‘the 21’ have energetically worked together to co-create public histories. To this end, they have worked in partnership with us as academic historians, community organisations and Birmingham City Council to establish a new, permanent memorial in the city centre. Moreover, family and friends of ‘the 21’ continue to organise an annual service to mark the memory of their loved ones, and the campaign for a judicial review into the events of the bombings continues to this day. While the legacy of the Birmingham Pub Bombings has arguably never been more prominently displayed in the city, the collective rendering of the case maintains and establishes new silences, the case of Tommy Marsh being a case in point. For while the story of ‘the 21’ is prominent and developing further within local and regional heritage, Tommy’s story remains marginal, almost lost. This silenced past poses new challenges, of finding broader community and shared meaning in public history. As noted by Franco (2017), communities have a stake in preserving their past and in participating in historical narrativisation. This partnership between public history and communities can lead to shaping policy, influencing change and strengthening community cohesion, but it would be a mistake to see its good work as fully accessible, inclusive or democratised.²⁴ From 1974 until the present day, we argue, the stories of the Black victims pose important questions and challenges, and have received scant attention, then and now.

Beyond a Missing Photo

The missing image of Tommy is only one indicator in a broader story of historical loss and marginalisation that can be traced to the days immediately following the bombings. Indeed, the absence of both Tommy and Paul was an immediate feature of post-bombing press reporting. While local newspapers, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* and the *Birmingham Post*, poured over stories of victims' lives and deaths, Tommy and Paul received scant attention. Given that Tommy was the youngest victim, and that he and Paul were killed without being in either of the pubs, this lack of reporting seems particularly striking, almost as if Tommy and Paul were deemed beyond the scope of what was constructed as a specific, local story.

In the first days after the bombings, the local press strove to make sense of the details. At the outset of the *Birmingham Evening Mail's* coverage of the story, page one was given over to 'The Faces of Youth and Innocence' that had been murdered. To the *Evening Mail*, this meant prominent photographs of the young female victims, Pamela Palmer, Maureen Ann Roberts and Paula Nash, below which there were smaller photographs of 'six more' casualties, all men of various ages (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 23 November 1974; Feldman and Laub 1992). Yet further below, under the subheading 'Coloured Men', the paper revealed that there remained four identified bodies, 'two of them believed to be West Indian' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, November 23, 1974). The unidentified men, that we know to have been Tommy Marsh and Paul Davies, were described as appearing to be 20 years old, both wearing brown suede jackets. By the final edition of the newspaper that day, even this description had faded. Here, the *Mail* simply reported that 'three of the dead remain unidentified'.

Two days later, on the 25 November, the newspaper had ascertained the names of the 'coloured' men. Tommy and Paul, it was mis-reported, shared a flat in Nechells, Birmingham (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 25 November 1974). This was the first of many inaccurate statements. Despite a story later in the newspaper which gave Paul's age accurately as 17 following an interview with his mother (which also inaccurately gave Tommy's age as 17), the paper on page one continued to describe both as 'about 20' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 25 November 1974). In actuality, Tommy would have turned 17 on the 30 November (Unedited Pen Portrait of Neil 'Tommy' Marsh, written by Daniele Fairweather-Tipping for the Coroner's Inquiry. Personal Correspondence, 2019).

Indeed, this is why he and Paul were out in the city centre in the first place. In later issues of the *Mail*, the misinformation continued. Tommy's funeral, it was reported, was to be held at Lodge Hill Cemetery in Selly Oak, whereas it was actually in Handsworth (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 29 November 1974). Tommy Marsh, the paper continued to report, was about to turn 18. He was described (alongside Davies) as working as a welder when in fact he was still in school at the time of his murder, and it was solely Davies that worked in welding (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 28 November 1974). Of course, in a moment of chaos, as news trickled into the paper, it is perhaps understandable that so many mistakes were made, mistakes which may well have had little to do with race. There were, though, differences in the representation of Paul and Tommy that merit consideration, and point to an underbelly of racial discrimination, which would be well described, in the language of a later period, as institutional racism.

In the majority of other cases, great interest was taken in the personal and family stories of victims, especially where individual deaths seemed particularly cruel or unlucky. For example, an interview with Lillian Thrupp, whose husband Trevor was killed in the Mulberry Bush, explained that he had only 'slipped into the pub for a packet of cigarettes' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 26 November 1974). Thrupp's funeral, another article in the *Evening Mail* detailed, sent a 'suburb ... into mourning', as 50 of his railwaymen colleagues formed 'a guard of honour' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 2 December 1974). Irish brothers Desmond and Eugene Reilly also caught the press's attention. Initially recorded only as the other two unidentified men (along with Tommy and Paul), the story of the Reilly brothers was soon fleshed out on the 25 November, as the 'Horror of Father who Found he had Lost Two Sons' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 25 November 1974). Killed in the Tavern in the Town, the Reilly brother's story was one of harrowing bad luck. One of the brothers, Desmond, had been working outside Birmingham but returned for the weekend as a surprise to his pregnant wife and family, only to be murdered (alongside his brother) before he had a chance to go home. The local papers told of a father going to identify the body of one son only first to find the other, of Desmond's pregnant widow throwing a solitary rose on her husband's grave, and over 1,000 people attending the men's funerals (*Birmingham Post*, 26 November 1974 and *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 3 December 1974). The newspapers, moreover, worked to locate the Reilly family in terms of their immigrant journey to Birmingham. 'The family, Irish Catholics, came to Britain from Donegal, more than 20 years

ago', the *Birmingham Post* told its readers (*Birmingham Post*, 26 November 1974). Of course, the ethnicity of the Reilly's was far from insignificant to the story. Given that the bombings were immediately understood as the work of the IRA, and the scale of anti-Irish violence in the days after the attacks, the fact that Irish people were among the dead and wounded was emphasised by a press that wanted to stress unity between British and Irish citizens in the wake of the bombings.²⁵ Beyond stories of the Irish dead and wounded, the *Evening Mail* reported that the Irish Development Fund had donated £1,000 to the Lord Mayor's Appeal for victims, and that an Irish retired nurse in Surrey had sent £500 (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 29 November 1974). Similarly, small acts of Irish solidarity were noted. An Irish pensioner in Stafford prison sent 65 pence to the victims' appeal, another Irish pensioner a postal order for 50 pence with a note, 'Words seem inadequate at the moment' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 26 November 1974).

As the city mourned, the Birmingham Irish were recognised by the local press, even in the face of substantial anti-Irish violence in the city, as a core part of the community, whose place in Birmingham was long standing. Yet as story after story of the terrible individual fortunes that led victims to death and injury made their way into the papers, the tragic cases of Tommy and Paul, who had not even entered either of the attacked pubs, was given little attention as the two blurred into characterless others, background figures in the pubs (when in fact they were not present in them). Tommy's status as youngest victim was left unrecognised as the *Evening Mail* awarded this unwanted accolade to 17-year-old Jane Davis, who was killed in the Tavern in the Town (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 3 December 1974). As individual stories faded, Tommy and Paul were presented as one, as the same age, wearing the same clothes, with the same employment, living at the same address. The only real detail that emerged was Paul's mother's contention that she had not realised at first he was missing because he was commonly absent, a focus which seemingly cemented a wider racial discourse surrounding roaming and unreliable Black masculinity (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 25 November 1974). Aside from this, the individuality of the men, and Tommy in particular, was lost. The details of Tommy's existence were subsumed into Paul's life, where they were considered at all. Without reference to his status as the youngest victim, or to his real age, work, or address, Tommy receded from view.

From the moment of his untimely death, in a climate of institutionalised racism, Tommy Marsh's history, his mark on this world, began to

fade. Internalizing the public lack of interest in her son, Hilda Turner's suffering became increasingly silent. Like many victims of trauma, she rarely allowed herself to engage with the events which had changed her life entirely (Feldman and Laub, 58; Herman 2001, 1). As Tommy's cousin Daniele Fairweather-Tipping observed, Turner did not find the space to mourn the loss of her son, which became evident during a 2019 inquest into the Bombings when it 'was as if she was grieving afresh' (Daniele Fairweather-Tipping, 2020). After her husband suggested that she stop going, she did not visit Tommy's grave 'very often' because 'it break me down' (Turner, 2019). Hilda's younger son also chose to disengage from his brother's story, and continues to decline to speak about the matter. 'He doesn't want to remember', she told us. Hilda did not much follow the case of the Birmingham Six, or seek involvement with Justice 4 the 21. Her niece Daniele explained that such engagement felt overwhelming, that Hilda preferred to manage the loss on her own terms, and had felt 'ready to move on' by the time the campaign started. The Turner/Marsh family silence, in which Tommy was not forgotten but seldom discussed, completed a vicious circle of historical loss. Having been relegated to the margins of public memory, the family, traumatised and exhausted, internalised the outside lack of interest, and chose silence and disengagement as the only plausible paths towards personal healing (Feldman and Laub 2020, 71).²⁶

How then might academic history begin to recover a life such as Tommy's, if, as this study has suggested, neither government and public accounts, nor community histories, have managed to capture the lived experience of many Black Britons? The challenge suggests that our role as historians is to prise open spaces for voices traditionally absent from public view. In doing so, we need to be cognisant of which communities or publics are being heard and who has access to these curatorial practices. After nearly 50 years, any such recovery will likely be limited; indeed, it is arguable that a trauma history like the one here under consideration 'can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence'. (Caruth 1996, 18). How then, even on modest terms, might it be possible to arrest the processes of loss that have meant Tommy 'fading' from 'memory' in both his family and community? Might we begin on a different path, where the individuality and inherent value of Tommy's life and death is better preserved and commemorated? Here, the answer seems to lie outside of the space where the loss occurred, away from and beyond the racialized community which ascribed such little value to Tommy's, and other, Black lives in our collective memory.

Recovery, instead, might more profitably be sought away from the colonial metropole, back within the bosom of a Caribbean community and culture, wherein Tommy's life was never defined in terms of Blackness. Indeed, the role played so far by Caribbean people in the recovery of Tommy's story seems highly significant, especially the arrival in Britain of Tommy's cousin, Fairweather-Tipping in 1993 (2019).

Daniele moved from her family home in Llundas Vale Jamaica to live with her grand aunt Hilda in Handsworth when she was 15 years old. A new migrant to Britain, Daniele's arrival offered Hilda a shot in the arm, improving her mental health at least in part by reuniting her with news from home, and contemporary Caribbean culture. Daniele's arrival, Hilda recalled, 'give her a lot of joke'. Looking back in 2019, Hilda still clearly remembered the joy of hearing from Daniele about Jamaican dancehall artist, Lloyd Lovindeer's comic take on the hurricane that had struck Jamaica in 1988. This Caribbean music, brought over by her niece, seems to have restored Hilda's ability to laugh and to feel part of a community again.

Daniele, moreover, came to Britain with an entirely different take on race and ethnicity, which would prove crucial to the recovery of Tommy's story. Having grown up in majority Black Jamaica, she was unused to the idea that Blackness was alien, other, or even a category of being. She recalled:

I grew up in Jamaica, the doctors are Black, the teachers are Black, everyone, so I have never actually thought of myself as Black as a child, I was just Jamaican really, and the notion of being Black is something I just had never encountered (Daniele Fairweather-Tipping, 2020).

Encountering racism for the first time only after her migration to Handsworth, Daniele could see more clearly than Hilda its impact on Black lives in Britain, and what had happened to her cousin Tommy. Although Hilda previously had only minimal contact with *Justice 4 the 21*, Daniele engaged with the group around the new inquest in 2019 to support her grand aunt. In so doing, she made steps to have the salience of race recognised as part of the pub bombings story and expressed frustration that these issues had not previously been considered:

Considering everything that we've gone through, through time, impact from Race Relations Act to Stephen Lawrence's case, all this, considering all that and you're dealing with police. Didn't it occur to anyone to look at that the impact that race could have played in terms of how things were dealt with? (Daniele Fairweather-Tipping, 2020).

In this rendering of the case, for the first time, Tommy was not only part of 'the 21'. Instead, Daniele's 'we' spoke to a different collective – that of Black Britons facing police injustice – and in the case of Tommy (and Stephen Lawrence), murder without justice. Daniele began asking different questions. Why, she wanted to know, were Tommy and Paul's bodies the last to be recovered from the scene when they were the first to be discovered? Was this treatment perhaps a racial prioritisation of victims by the emergency services? This kind of critical stance, foregrounding questions of racial injustice, stood in contrast to that of Hilda, who, Daniele explained, came 'from a generation who accepts racism like that'. In contrast, for Daniele, there was a specific issue relating to race and injustice that needed to be addressed if Tommy's story was to be recovered. She explained that Tommy, as a Black victim of the bombings, had been 'washed out of society . . . just gone . . . Hasn't got a face . . . that's what drove me to take part' (Daniele Fairweather-Tipping, 2020).

Taking part in the *Justice 4 the 21* campaign, however, did not in and of itself recover Tommy's story. As Daniele discovered that the collective was not much interested in a race-focused analysis of the pub bombings, she felt frustrated and isolated. Yet pushing Tommy's case back into public view yielded new friendships, which have enabled the nature of Tommy and his life to become more visible. On seeing Daniele's involvement with *Justice 4 the 21*, the Birmingham/Caribbean poet Benjamin Zephaniah wrote to her explaining that he had been friends with Tommy, offering his memories of the teenager. In the absence of a photograph, Zephaniah told of a shy boy who was fair skinned with hazel eyes. This description, and the access route into Tommy's teenage friendship circle, left Daniele feeling that Zephaniah had 'given me a better picture of who Tommy was than my aunt'. The poet, moreover, subsequently agreed to write a speech for a city centre memorial service on the forty-fifth anniversary of the bombings. Here, for the first time, Tommy and Paul took centre stage as Zephaniah allowed his imagination to explore what their lives may have become, were they not killed in the pub bombings. Combining historical and fictional narrative, Zephaniah's 'critical fabulation' sought to make sense of the gaps that exist in the individual and collective histories of the pub bombings.

... I always wonder what Paul and Neil [Tommy] would be doing now - had they lived. In my head Paul would be an action film hero, a kind of dreadlocks Bruce Lee, and Neil would have invented something that we still just can't imagine. A kind of Jamaican – Brummie Leonardo Da Vinci, but we don't know, because they were taken away from you so young (Statement written by

Benjamin Zephaniah, read as part of the memorial service for the victims of the pub bombings held at the Tree Memorial at Grand Central, Birmingham, November 24, 2019).

This short portrait speaks to a painstaking process of recovery. Through these words, lives lost as a result of terrorism, relegated by racism and trauma in the city's communal history, were fleetingly brought alive in the imagination of Birmingham's foremost poet. Zephaniah could not attend the memorial service himself, but asked for his speech to be read by his brother, a decision that allowed Black histories to be articulated by a Black resident of the city. In a Caribbean Brummie accent, probably not too far from that of Tommy and Paul, a story of recovery was made plausible, if only for a few moments. The challenge for historians, indeed for us all, is to amplify pre-existing community voices with frequency and volume. This project indicates that doing so is only achievable through direct and long-term engagement with families and communities, listening and learning from their struggles and stories and, crucially, holding space for them to say what are the priorities and principles of recovery and preservation. This approach necessitates a slower pace of historical co-production, signalling away from extractive, academic-driven community engagement. For new histories are unlikely to emerge from the spaces in which they were initially lost. Having been silenced by government records and dominant narratives of public history, recovery seems likely to involve digging in a new place, abandoning for good the idea that academics can alone fix damage in which we (at least partially) have been complicit. Innovative, community-engaged approaches alone cannot atone for the sins of the past, or make manifest that which is forever lost. They can, however, serve to remind us of the lives that we so carelessly cast aside, and create a blueprint for future histories that will serve us all better.

Archival Afterlives

There are important methodological implications of recovery work of this kind. As this project has attempted to piece together the life of Tommy Marsh, it has found that the archival afterlife of his story is just as revealing, inviting us to reconsider our practice as historians. Our primary task, as Hanna implores, is 'not just to excavate the past, but to understand why some pasts are unseen, and to comprehend the processes whereby people, events, and systems are rendered "invisible" as part of

our past' (Hanna 2020, 5). In other words, we must probe what is made visible and what is hidden within historical accounts. As this article has shown, this is pertinent for both public histories as well as government records.

Tommy's case study demonstrates that state and institutional responses to certain lives – and, in particular, Black British lives – oftentimes renders those on the margins of society to be omitted or overlooked. Tommy was a Black Commonwealth migrant who had arrived in Britain to join his family. His story, however, is not only about navigating the shift from rural Jamaica to inter-city Birmingham, but is one that is immersed in the normative, inherited canons of colonial power relations that serves to separate the 'local' from the 'foreign'. Those immediately reporting on the pub bombings failed to fully recognise and provide space for Tommy in this local history. Since traditional documentary archival collections are not passive storehouses, we argue that erasure of this kind lends itself to a distinct form of racism: an epistemological racism. After all, racial inequalities in government or public accounts influence our knowledge production and consumption. The durability of this erasure has meant that until recently Tommy Marsh remained on the periphery, both in the immediate aftermath of the bombings and in public histories, where he was simply represented by a silhouette.

Tommy's story has invited us to ask: what publics are being represented by public histories? While public and community archives offer significant opportunities to address gaps in knowledge production, issues concerning curatorial practices persist. There remains important work to be done on how we can read and counter the structural issues that rest behind the silences, the gaps and the misrepresentations. Simply working around the coloniality of knowledge will not help us get through, and break free from, issues of racial inequality and marginalisation in the struggle for decoloniality. One way in which we can bring these rigidities and distortions to light is to read both against the archival grain and to understand what might be at odds with the historical record (Hartman 2008; Stoler 2010). In doing so, we argue that it is possible to identify the significance of multiple forms of repositories. The epistemic value of 'histories from below' – located in personal archives, pen portraits and oral history interviews – reduces dependence on institutional archives and public history accounts. To find the 'archival pulse' then is to find individual agency and 'critical fabulation', as demonstrated by the efforts of Tommy's family and the creative practices of people like Benjamin

Zephaniah. This ‘pulse’ reminds us that Black community and family archives are invaluable archival spaces in their own right, where Black lives are recognised in ways that are rarely acknowledged by professional historians. In this way, the ‘archival pulse’ not only demands co-production between historical actors and professional historians, but it also offers critical lessons in the limits and possibilities of public histories.

Notes

1. See Henry (1984). *The Politics of Race in Britain*. Allen & Unwin; Walvin (1973). *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555–1945*. London: Allen Lane.
2. Kelso Cochrane was 32 years old when he was murdered, Rolan Adams was 15, Stephen Lawrence was 18 and Michael Menson was 30.
3. For a wider discussion on Black British Histories, see Bressey et al. (2021). ‘Introduction: Reflections on Black British Histories in History Workshop Journal’. *History Workshop Journal*. Virtual Special Issue: Black British Histories.
4. Manoff (2016). ‘Mapping Archival Silence: Technology and the Historical Record’ in Foscari, Fiorella et al., *Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories*. Facet Publishing, 2016, 63–82, 75.
5. The terms ‘records’ and ‘archives’ can sometimes be used synonymously. To clarify, ‘records’ refers to historical materials that everyone can keep. ‘archives’ refers to the management of these records. Preserved within its own distinctive body of knowledge, ‘archives’ therefore denotes those ‘records’ that have been recognised as having long-term value. See Thomas et al., *The Silence of the Archive*, ix.
6. See, for example, Meleisa Ono-George’s important work on the ‘Power in the Telling’: Community-Engaged Histories of Black Britain: <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/black-history/power-in-the-telling/> (Accessed 2 April 2023).
7. See Hartman (2019). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*. New York: W. W. Norton. Hartman, of course, refers to a specific set of archival silences and gaps that are particular to the American context in which she writes, yet her theoretical reflections are valuable for research on UK-based community-led histories.
8. Additional to BASA and BCA, see the work of the Northamptonshire Black History Project, the Young Historians Project, The Rural Black History Project, Sankofa Project, and Windrush Strike Back.
9. See Bressey (2020). ‘Surfacing Black and Brown Bodies in the Digital Archives’. *Journal of Historical Geography*; Bressey (2016). ‘Black Victorians and Anti-Caste: Mapping the Geographies of ‘Missing Readers’ in *Media and Print Culture Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Victorian Reading Experience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 75–92; Bressey (2014). ‘Archival interventions: Participatory Research and Public Historical Geographies’.

Journal of Historical Geography. 46, 102–104. For reflections on Black participatory research, see Drame and Decoteau (2016). *Black Participatory Research Power, Identity, and the Struggle for Justice in Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

10. See Nasar, Saima and Schaffer. Gavin (2020). ‘The Poetics of Narrativity: Understanding Trauma, Temporality, and Spatiality Forty Years after the Birmingham Pub Bombings’. *Journal of Social History*. 53:4, 1008–1032.
11. Stoler asserts that the pulse of the archive is rooted in ‘in the quiescence and quickened pace of its own production, in the steady and feverish rhythms of its repeated incantations, formulae and frames’ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 35–49.
12. For many analysts of trauma, the act of pursuing justice in-and-of-itself has been seen as beneficial to victims. By campaigning for their rights, Fleury and Mahmoud-Shwana have argued, traumatised people can ‘regain ... human dignity and personal validation...[and]start to set aside the burden of nightmares’. See Fleury and Mahmoud-Shwana (2020). ‘The Rupture of Links in the Context of Migration: Open-Mouthed and Sewn-Mouths’ in Gautier, Andres and Sabatini Scalmati, Anna. *Bearing Witness: Psychoanalytic Work with People Traumatized by Torture and State Violence* London: Karnac. 91–114, 100. There were some exceptions. As Marsh’s cousin Daniele Fairweather-Tipping noted, Marsh’s family did not closely align with Justice 4 the 21 for many years: Interview with Daniele Fairweather-Tipping and Saima Nasar (2020). Birmingham.
13. See Herman (2001). *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora. 61 and 214.
14. Our methodological approach follows the work of Hartman (2019) who interrogates the ways in which historical archives, creative reading practices, and personal history can be read in close narration. See *Wayward Lives*..
15. For analysis of the prosecution of the Birmingham Six see Mullin (1986). *Error of Judgement: The Truth about the Birmingham Bombings*. London: Chatto and Windus.
16. While there are post-mortem photographs, no known living image of Tommy Marsh exists. The use of a silhouette has become ubiquitous. It is unclear when it was first used but the image is reproduced across media outlets including the B.B.C, ITV and the *Birmingham Mail*. The image below, for example, has been shared widely by the B.B.C: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-47405130>. (Accessed 26 April 2021).
17. For literature on how photography has been used for social history, see: Hayes (2006). ‘Introduction: Visual Genders’ *Gender & History*, 17, 3. Also see: Edwards (2012) *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918*. Duke University Press. For research on photographs and historical geography, see Bressey (2011). ‘The City of Others: Photographs from the City of London Asylum Archive’. 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*. 13.

18. Hall describes a creative explosion of photography and visual arts particularly among second-generation Black communities, which he attributes to British racism and anti-racism. He asserts: 'Putting black people in the frame is not just a figural practice. It is what is going on around the figure being photographed and the situation in which it is placed, even though the photographer is not really focusing on these aspects. In these photographs the body language, for example, is extremely eloquent'. See Hall and Back (2009). 'At Home and Not at Home: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Les Back'. *Cultural Studies*. 23.
19. See Perry, *London is the Place for Me*.
20. See Burke (2012). *By the Rivers of Birminam*. Birmingham: MAC Birmingham; Derek, Homer, and Reardon (2019). *Handsworth Self Portraits: 40 Years On*. Birmingham: MAC Birmingham; Caesar (1984). *Into the Open*. London: National Portrait Gallery. For further analysis see Connell (2012). 'Photographing Handsworth: photography, meaning and identity in a British inner city', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46:2, 128–53.
21. More recently, the image of Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year old youth stabbed to death in an unprovoked racist attack in 1993, is another well-known case of a personal image supporting a counter-narrative of a personal Black life.
22. Stoler relates this to colonial knowledge production, see: *Along the Archival Grain*.
23. On the uses of photography, see Hanna (2020). *Snapshot Stories: Visuality, Photography, and the Social History of Ireland, 1922–2000*. Oxford University Press.
24. As Toni Morrison avers, a 'rememory' of things forgotten or repressed has the potential to reconfigure narrative authority in important ways. See Morrison (2007). *Beloved*. Vintage.
25. For details of anti-Irish violence in the wake of the pub bombings see Moran (2010). *Irish Birmingham: A History*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 199–201; Mullin, *Error of Judgement*, 7–8; and O'Brien (2017). 'Negotiations of Irish identity in the wake of terrorism: the case of the Irish in Birmingham 1973–74'. *Irish Studies Review*. 25:3, 372–94.
26. As Laub reminds us, it is only when the survivor knows he is being heard, that he will 'stop to hear – and listen to – himself'. See Feldman and Laub (2020). 'Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening' in Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London and New York: Routledge. 71.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Gavin Schaffer is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Birmingham.

Dr. Saima Nasar is Lecturer in the History of Africa and its Diasporas at the University of Bristol.

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