

Intersections in the art of Elsa James.

BLACKWOOD, J.

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My first encounter with the work of Elsa James was in the now-renowned *Radical Essex* book in late 2018. My own background was in working with performance art and artists from around the UK, and from the former Yugoslavia. Through this core interest, a strong focus on identities away from the urban “centres” of art production, and in diaspora, formed. The timing of the writing was also opportune for, as never before, a group of writers, thinkers, social historians, and artists began to re-think both the history and significance of Essex as a county.

In an era where nuance is prized least of all, for it does not translate well in 140 characters, something of a push back is being experienced in Essex. This is a place whose stereotypical portrayals are not a local, but a global joke. TV shows such as *The Only Way is Essex*, an obsessive focus on Essex’s criminal underworld and its fictional portrayal in films such as *The Rise of the Footsoldier* and *Essex Boys*, an acquisitive and philistine culture emerging from the decline of Ford in Dagenham, and the rise of the post-industrial financial and service industries of the 1980s and 1990s. The new City boys were presumed to be the bedrock of a home-owning, share-owning monoculture favouring the Conservative Party and, in more recent times, various political formations aiming for the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. These are stereotypes where cash, brash, ruthless violence and empty promiscuity meld in a sticky, unpleasant cocktail.

Yet the purpose of books such as *Radical Essex* and more recent writings such as Gillian Darley’s *Excellent Essex* (2019) and Sarah Perry’s *Essex Girls* (2020), alongside the long-running investigations of Tim Burrows and Ken Worpole, have been to open out Essex as a much more complex, layered, and contested space than a brief glance might suggest. The very contours of the place are fuzzy; no one really knows where Essex stops and London begins to the west, whereas in the empty, huge-skied mysteries of the south and east, the muddy coastline is in a losing push-me-pull-you battle with the North Sea and the River Thames.

In hauntological times, of our mourning for lost futures that the modernist past promised but didn't deliver, Essex is very prominent. This can be seen in the long elegy to the wasted potential of Basildon, and the stubborn resilience of its small arts community in the film *New Town Utopia* (directed by Christopher Ian Smith, 2017) to David Blandy's anthropogenic and psychogeographical investigations of Canvey Wick in the project *The World After* of 2019.¹

The emergence of a process of critical questioning and inquiry into the complex nature of Essex – and its multiple realities – have been stimulated and supported by a steadily growing ecology of artists, institutions, places where art is produced, discussed, and consumed. The practice of Elsa James emerges in part from this milieu but has a much longer hinterland and adds a very specific patina to some of the issues at play in these polyphonic over-writings of Essex culture(s).

It is the intersections between four thematic areas that give Elsa's work in the last few years such a strength. These pillars are class, gender, place and race, and the overlappings and dissonances between each of these factors in turn. The artist's mature work in the last six years combines varied dialogues between each of these aspects, sharpened with a critical and activist cutting edge. Whilst we will develop each of these themes in the analysis of the work below, the roots of these issues can be found in the artist's upbringing in west London in the 1970s.

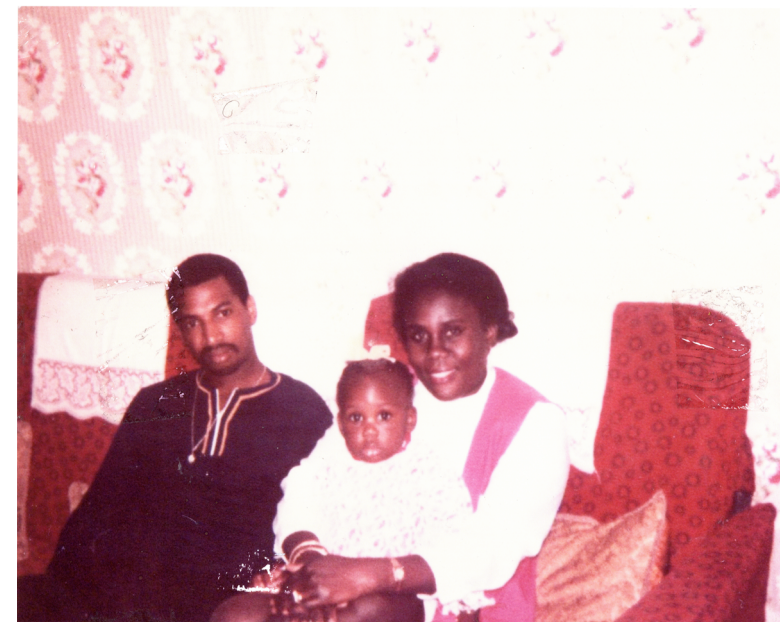
Elsa James' parents arrived in England from the Caribbean in the early 1960s; a generation after the landing of the *Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948, and a generation before the "Rude Boys" written about by Dick Hebdige in *Subcultures; The Meaning of Style* in the late 1970s, the descendants of the Windrush generation who had sickened of the impact of structural racism on their lives by the mid 1970s.

Elsa's mother is Trinidadian, and her father originally from the tiny Grenadian island of Carriacou, moving later to Trinidad to work. The couple met, and married, in London. Elsa's parents quickly found employment and a strong memory of them is their relentless work ethic. Elsa remembers

1. See www.davidblandy.co.uk/the-world-after for more information on this project.



Ethelred aka Cape and Veronica James on their wedding day, 1962



Elsa with her mother and father, 1970

her parents “always working”; both worked most of their lives in England at Lucas CAV, a west London car manufacturing concern. Although art was not a part of Elsa’s upbringing at home, it is clear that both of her parents were extremely creative and resourceful people.

Elsa’s mother had a gift for clothes making and would make everything for her three growing daughters on her Singer sewing machine. Her father, meanwhile, was a craftsman who enjoyed fixing things, and was also a significant traditional musician. Her father, together with her uncle, founded the Ebony Steel Band in 1969, a group that would go onto national fame in the mid 1970s, coming in second place behind child star Lena Zavaroni on TV variety show *Opportunity Knocks* in 1974, and releasing an album in 1976. Caribbean steel bands tended to be overwhelmingly male during Elsa’s childhood, but her father taught her to play some basic tunes on the steel pan.



Veronica James with office colleagues at Lucas CAV, 1973



Ethelred aka Cape James, second from right, Ebony Steel Band, 1973

As Elsa grew up another key influence was Saturday school – an experience shared by many black children who grew up in the period, including the artist, Steve McQueen; Vanley Burke has taken many photographs of Saturday school excursions. These were a mixture of arts and crafts, learning traditional Caribbean folklore and songs, and day excursions to the English coast and resorts such as Margate. They were an opportunity to travel and to socialise, and to see her parents’ famed self-reliance in another context; the mothers packed cooked Caribbean food to eat throughout the entire day, rather than considering eating out on their journey.

Elsa had a talent for drawing and was encouraged by her art teacher at high school to apply for a foundation year, in preparation for entry to Chelsea School of Art. However, her parents were more concerned that her future stability be guaranteed by “getting a trade”. In fact, after leaving school she was also to leave art for a period of around fifteen years, drawing all the while.

For a period in the late 1980s she worked as a top-level fashion model,



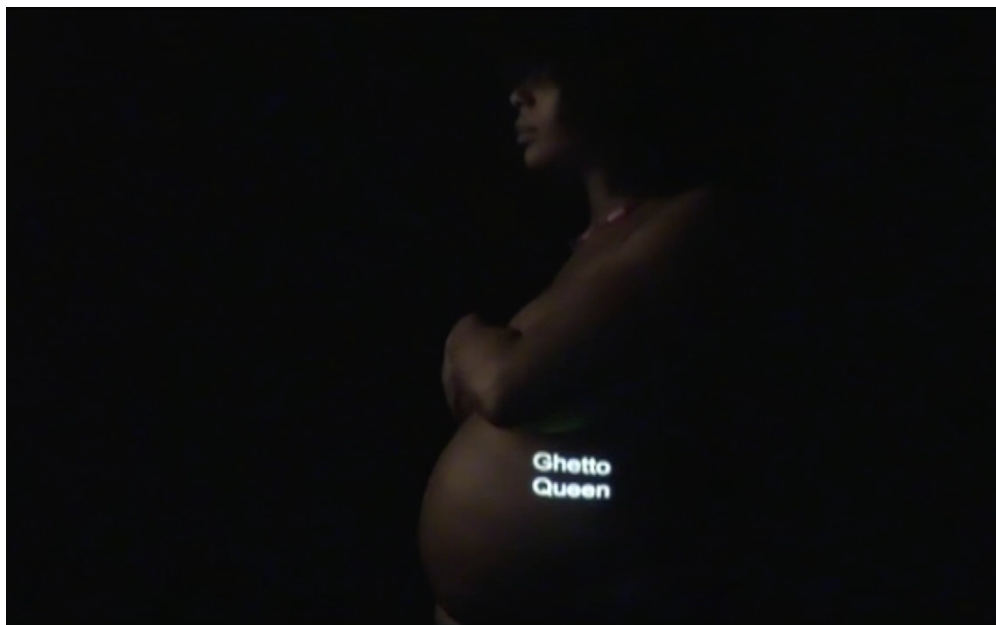
Self-portrait pencil drawing, 1991



Self-portrait compressed pastel drawing with blue background, 1995

travelling, and working in Japan and South Korea with the Japanese designer Michiko Koshino, but it was a life that brought little stability or satisfaction. A decade later, having left the fashion business behind and after a series of office jobs, the artist was living in Essex with a young family and began to move back in the direction of art via a course at Havering College; a course that ultimately was to lead her to a degree at Chelsea College of Art, over twenty years after she had first harboured ambitions to go there.

Many of the themes currently playing out in Elsa's mature work could be seen in development during her time at Chelsea, from 2006–10. Going to art college as a mature student can often be a difficult experience, being at a different stage of personal development and having much more extensive life experience than the majority of your peers. This was particularly the case with Elsa, who re-engaged with her university career whilst living in Essex, alongside the everyday rhythms of a young family life. In this sense, the artist's own upbringing to the consistent drumbeat of hard work by her parents repeated itself at this time. Two works completed during this period illustrate well, the development of the artist's thinking.



150 Lies Myths and Truths

Film still. Camcorder video without sound, duration 18:00 mins, 2006



Goat Curry and Rap

Film still. Camcorder video with sound, duration 8:54 mins, 2010

The lens-based performance *150 Lies, Myths and Truths* from 2006, filmed on a camcorder, shows a preoccupation with subjectivities associated with black motherhood. It was a piece deriving from the ongoing debates surrounding multiculturalism in the post-Lawrence era, and Britain's then anxious self-reflection through the prism of a phrase from the Lawrence report – "institutional racism". The lengthy debate that followed included controversial interventions from the then head of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, who suggested that the strategy of "multiculturalism" from the 1980s and 1990s had failed and needed fundamental re-visiting.² The post-Lawrence settlement featured an attempt to open up debates around previously untouchable shibboleths such as these, and an attempted turn toward electoral "respectability" by parties on the extreme racist right of the political spectrum.

Whilst such debate was in the background of the piece, it is also one concerning trauma and defiance: the perspectival shift from a depersonalised *object* of racist epithets, into a fully individual *subject*,

2. See Saba Salman & Patrick Butler, "Race Against Time", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2004, accessible at: www.theguardian.com/society/2004/mar/17/guardiansocietysupplement.politics1

defying and confronting the imagined audience beyond the screen, unflinchingly.

It is a piece which also obliges audiences to re-visit the shallowness of “official” positions of anti-racism and “tolerance” of differing ethnicities and religious faiths. The post-Lawrence era’s observance of these standpoints did not mean that racist behaviours had been challenged or conquered effectively – merely that certain orthodoxies had been learned for public performance, leaving private views unchallenged. This is a debate still resonant in our times on the sports field, with black athletes challenging the learned orthodoxy of “taking a knee” before a game or a meet begins, with the gesture not backed up by real-world action. Speaking on racism from the standpoint of late 2020, the artist observed that: “Well, this is not new to me. I’ve been having this conversation my entire life; my skin’s been this colour since I was born, and so I’ve grown up in racist Britain.”³

150 Lies Myths and Truths, then, sees the beginnings of a methodology that is repeated and enhanced in later works such as *Forgotten Black Essex*. Elsa offers a performative version of herself, humanising and exemplifying black women who have been subject to the twin iniquities of racism and misogyny, and exemplifying a quiet and stolid confrontation with, and resistance towards, the attitudes. The foregrounding of the individual personality against hateful discourse, based on a generalising caricature from a position of ignorance, is somehow extremely powerful; expressing not only a hope, but a certainty, that such prejudice will not prevail.

A similar technique is on display in the 2010 video piece, *Goat Curry & Rap*. The film was made in response to an article written in December 2009 by the right-wing provocateur Rod Liddle in *The Spectator*, the house magazine for UK Conservatism and Euroscepticism. In the article, entitled “The Benefits of a Multicultural Britain”, Liddle opined that:

“The overwhelming majority of street crime, knife crime, gun crime, robbery and crimes of sexual violence in London is carried out by young men from

3. Conversation with Elsa James, 27 November 2020

the African-Caribbean community. In return, we have rap music, goat curry and a far more vibrant and diverse understanding of cultures which were once alien to us.”⁴

Liddle’s stereotypical positives resulting from the presence of people of colour in London, as a means of trying to soften his rather grim and prejudiced remarks about the prevalence of young black youth in criminal activity, are extraordinarily crass even twelve years later. His colleagues at the magazine quickly distanced themselves from the article, and he was ultimately censured by the Press & Complaints Commission after a four-month investigation.⁵

In responding to Liddle’s unpleasant remarks, Elsa again humanises these demeaning stereotypes in a performative manner, confronting these outdated attitudes that may be held by some audience members, with a direct, unflinching stare. The association of young black people with criminality, deviance and aberrant behaviour has been a white racist trope for over a century, since the first “race riots” in the UK in Cardiff, Liverpool and Glasgow in early summer 1919; attempts were made to organise politically around this alleged “criminality” by Oswald Mosley during race riots in Notting Hill in the late 1950s. Growing up in west London in the 1970s, Elsa was no different from any other member of the black community at that time, in being “othered” and aware of the practice and outcomes of racial discrimination. In *Goat Curry and Rap*, Elsa adopts a strategy from *ju-jitsu*; as in the martial art, she uses the negative energy of stereotypical cultural markers – eating a dish of Curry Goat whilst listening to a UK Grime soundtrack – against themselves, as a means of subtly confronting and negating them through the force of her own presence and personality.

In both of these early works the “social turn” in Elsa’s practice is implicit. Although these are solo works, they derive from an individuation of a collective experience, the artist, in the frame of her works, acts as an exemplar of the effects of racist behaviours. Throughout the last decade

4. Rod Liddle “The Benefits of a Multicultural Britain” 5.12.2009 blog in the Spectator.
5. John Plunkett, “Rod Liddle censured by the PCC”, The Guardian, 29 March 2010
www.theguardian.com/media/2010/mar/29/rod-liddle-pcc-spectator

in Elsa's practice there has been a tension between the individual characters that she occupies in her work and the subjugation of that personality in community and socially engaged work, where the artist facilitates the collective voices of differing community groups. The artist has worked from an activist standpoint with groups of women locally, in facilitating access to the arts for folk living with dementia, in working with community groups, and, significantly, in hearing the stories and documenting the fates of asylum seekers and refugees from Zimbabwe in her current home, Southend. It is likely that this long-established dialogue with these asylum seekers and refugees as they seek to re-build their lives in Essex will shape the contours of a significant body of new work for her first solo institutional exhibition at Focal Point Gallery in summer 2022.

Elsa James first moved to Essex with her family in 1999. Initially, the family lived in Chafford Hundred, which was then, as the artist remembers, almost exclusively a white area. Two decades later, the area is now known as "Little Lagos" given the number of families from the Nigerian diaspora in south-east England who have settled there. Although Chafford Hundred was an introduction to suburban Essex for Elsa at the end of the 1990s, it was only when the family moved to Southend-on-Sea that the artist was able to apply her already established practical interests in class, race and womanhood, and to try and understand how these overlapping discourses could be applied in a very specific local context. When Elsa moved to Southend in 2009, as she revealed in interview, it was with a sense of trepidation, however:

"So, Southend, as you know, had a real history with the National Front. I mean, I was aware of Southend's reputation in the 80s. Back in the day my husband and his friends would visit nightclubs on the coast, but they didn't hang around at the end of their night. But even when I lived in Thurrock, I didn't feel the whole kind of concept of Essex. I didn't. It was only until I moved to Southend that it felt more Essex than Thurrock."⁶

Established in Southend, Elsa realised that much of the infrastructure of her life that had been readily available in London, and in Thurrock, had yet

6. Conversation between Elsa James & Jon Blackwood, 27 November 2020.

to be established in Southend; Caribbean food was not really available, and the local community very small indeed. Thurrock, straddled by the M25 and the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, is in a corridor of geographical uncertainty between London and Essex, whereas Southend perhaps offered a more authentic experience of a different, older Essex. The artist spoke of a gradual realisation of "feeling othered in a region that has been historically othered"; being black in a county that is frequently the butt of jokes beyond its borders. Her late father described her as "living behind God's back" in her new home, an old Caribbean euphemism referring to the physical and cultural distance from her roots in west London.

In point of fact, the move to Southend provoked a deep self-reflective process of thinking and understanding not only what it meant to be black in Essex, but also how a black person could have agency to talk about Essex meaningfully and to challenge not only the stereotypical views of outsiders, but of fellow citizens resident in the county. In some ways, the move to Southend, with its underdeveloped infrastructure for black people, can be seen in retrospect as a mirror of her parents' experience of moving to London from the Caribbean in the early 1960s:

"And moving to Essex...if we wanted to buy Caribbean food we had to go to London. We had to drive. We had to leave Essex and it's still like that to a certain extent. But now there are shops where you can get African and Caribbean food and hair products and things like that. It reminds me of what that must have felt like being in Britain in the fifties and sixties, and not being able to have access to ingredients that you would use for your food and so on."⁷

This artist can actually be said to feel triply "displaced". Firstly, Elsa has a profound rupture in her family history, caused by the enslavement, at an unknown time, of ancestors from West Africa, likely on the territory of present-day Ghana. Elsa's surname, James, is Scottish, but she has no links at all to Scotland; this is likely the surname of the plantation owner who uprooted, enslaved, and violated unknown ancestors at an unknown time. We will never have a way of knowing precisely where Elsa's family came from or how precisely they came to work in the Caribbean; it

7. Conversation with Elsa, 20 November 2020.



Black Girl Essex: Here We Come, Look We Here. Film still, Tilbury Docks, Essex.
HD video with sound, duration 13:54 mins. Image: Andy Delaney, 2019

is a deliberate tear in the historical fabric that can never be repaired, only partly held together by speculation.

The second “displacement” can be found in her being a black person in what was a predominantly white county – although the complex histories of black people in Essex, long pre-dating the arrival of the *Windrush* in 1948, are in the process of being uncovered, as a key underpinning of the artist’s current practice.

The final “displacement” is that of an artist who is unashamedly of and from Essex in the present time, someone who is working persistently to over-write the county’s negative stereotypes through historical research and a nuanced, still unravelling practice. The claiming of this provincial identity and the making of it as a significant centre of the practice, upsets the more familiar development of a contemporary artist’s branding, where any local or provincial element can be presented as an optional thread of specificity, an ironic invocation of “the parochial” in a metropolitan middle-class context. These delicate yet loaded tracings are the underpinnings of Elsa’s mature practice in the last four years, both solo and group projects.



Forgotten Black Essex: Hester and Hester Woodley
St Mary’s Little Parndon Church, Harlow, Essex. Image: Amaal Said 2018



Forgotten Black Essex: Princess Dinubolu
Southend, Essex. Image: Amaal Said 2018

This lively interplay between class, gender, race and local identity is still very challenging for many. This was emphasised when the artist went for an interview on the project *Black Girl Essex* on BBC radio, only for the presenter to say straightforwardly “I didn’t really think we had any black people in Essex.”

Elsa’s two films as part of the *Forgotten Black Essex* project of 2018 *Hester & Hester Woodley* and *Princess Dinubolu*, link thematically with the 2019 work commissioned by Furtherfield, *Circle of Blackness*. *Forgotten Black Essex* grew out of a period of collaboration with the historian and archivist, S. I. Martin, who specialises in Black British history. This exchange reflected Elsa’s determination to continue to try and pull at the threads of hidden pre-Windrush black histories in Essex.

In all these pieces, Elsa performs as a black character from the past. Hester Woodley, we learn, was an enslaved women “belonging” to a Bridget Woodley, transported with the family from St. Kitts back to Essex with a daughter, in 1741. Hester was obliged to leave several children behind, and in due course her daughter was returned from Essex to St. Kitts, to be put into service elsewhere with the Woodley family. The film’s



Forgotten Black Essex: Hester and Hester Woodley
St Mary's Little Parndon Church, Harlow, Essex.
Image: Amaal Said 2018



Forgotten Black Essex: Princess Dinubolu
Southend, Essex. Image: Amaal Said 2018

narrative, and Elsa's performance of it, is imbued with the trauma of a life marked by endless loss, sadness, and separation. Filmed in the Essex church where Hester Woodley was remarkably given a headstone by the family who had enslaved her, it is a work which does not seek to overly dramatize or make saccharine such an appalling story – merely to record it in a factual and matter of fact way. This approach echoes Elsa's earlier works from 2006/10 discussed above; the powerful, weighted inhabiting of a character through performativity. It's a moment of reckoning with one individual life story warped and destroyed by the twinned processes of slavery and colonialism, and an attempt to re-trace the unique contours of that life in a presentation of its dignity and forbearance.

Both the *Forgotten Black Essex* films hold our attention through the even melody of Elsa's narrative voice, and some astonishing use of colour. In *Hester & Hester Woodley* Elsa, in character, walks into the interior of the church that has been lit in a saturated red, perhaps symbolising the oppressive and alien environment in which Hester Woodley lived out the last twenty-seven years of her life in England; the same saturated red is found in the dress of the character of Princess Dinubolu, the second of Elsa's films in this series.

In this later work, Elsa adopts the character of Princess Dinubolu, an alleged "West African princess" who entered a beauty competition in Southend-on-Sea in the summer of 1908. As Elsa walks around the streets and the railway station of contemporary Southend, we are drawn into the "scandal" of over a century ago, widely reported in syndicated newspapers around the UK at the time. Whilst the historical facts of the story of Hester Woodley are well-established, there is much more ambiguity and a space for play in the role of Princess Dinubolu. Whilst the name could be stated to be authentic, from the region of present-day Senegal, there is some doubt as to whether "Princess Dinubolu" actually existed or was merely a clever marketing ruse drawn up by the beauty pageant's organiser to raise the profile of his event. Elsa re-interprets the character in her video, focusing on eccentricities of beauty routine and subtly laying bare the extent of racial prejudice in Edwardian Britain. Yet, although these two videos draw from strategies of televisual re-enactment of historical events, they are not intended to be viewed through this lens. Rather, as Elsa herself states, there is an attempt to inhabit the characters of black women



Forgotten Black Essex: Princess Dinubolu
Southend, Essex. Image: Amaal Said 2018

from the past as a means of understanding the experience of black women in the present:

"My approach to working with these two accounts of archival documentation is not just to retell or re-enact them. Rather, I am curious to ground them in the present by layering a contemporary lens that reinterprets how the two stories resonate with me as a black woman living in Essex today."⁸

This body of work opens out the history of differing black and diaspora communities in Essex prior to the arrival of the Windrush generation at Tilbury in 1948. The painful juxtaposition of sensitively observed human details set against the monotone relation of acts of colonial violence or everyday racism from past times in England really does force the viewer to think again about received ideas of England's history and the history of differing ethnic communities in the country. Elsa's performative inhabiting of the characters that she seeks to re-insert into an ever more complex

8. www.elsajames.com/forgotten-black-essex

and contested sense of Englishness / Britishness is extremely germane in the present political climate.

The 2019 work *Circle of Blackness* alters this strategy and offers a tantalising glimpse of what might become an “Essex Futurism” in Elsa’s work yet to come. Part of an exhibition celebrating 150 years of Finsbury Park in north London, organised by Furtherfield, *Circle of Blackness* saw Elsa again engage with the historian of black Britishness, S. I. Martin, in unravelling the character of Anne E. Styles (1821–1903), born into slavery in Jamaica and who was destined to spend her life working as a “domestic servant” across differing locations in north London. The work differs in that it also offers a vision from 2169, where a re-cast Styles returns, perhaps from a parallel life, to the site of her former enslavement, from a position of strength and indomitability. In so doing, this intriguing work parallels the work of other black British artists who have engaged seriously with Afrofuturism, such as Larry Achiampong in his *Relic* series of 2019.

These works undeniably had an impact in Essex and the wider south east, being featured heavily in local print and broadcast media, and provoking considerable debate not only on what Essex had forgotten or chose not to know about itself but linking those debates into a wider framework of the post-colonial, de-colonial, and the ways in which these films challenge what we think we might know about black British identities.

Perhaps the biggest impact of Elsa’s work on differing Essex identities derived elsewhere in her collective work with the Essex Girls Liberation Front.⁹ Founded in 2017, the Front is an activist collective of women seeking to challenge the damaging stereotypes of Essex women which have traction far beyond the boundaries of the UK; the negative connotations of “Essex Girl” have traction internationally through communities of English language learners, and through television programmes such as *The Only Way is Essex*. A cartoon vision of a county of souped-up Ford Focuses, nail extensions, fake tan and leopard print, the dubious acquisition of, and tasteless extravagance with, money, have contributed almost to a sense of an “Essex cringe” when folk from the county run up against these stereotypes in other parts of the country,

9. For more information see www.facebook.com/WEARETHEEGLF/



Circle of Blackness,
Holographic broadcast, Time Portals: Furtherfield Gallery, London, 2019.

in real life. The core group of the EGLF through fun events, agitprop, performance, publication (*The Trawler*) and advocacy have started a debate within and beyond Essex on the effect of the Essex Girl stereotype. As this text was in the first stages of being written, in December 2020, the group scored its biggest success, with the removal of the pejorative term “Essex Girl” from the Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary.¹⁰ The term persists in other dictionaries and in language courses, however, so the campaigning will continue into the future.

Two of Elsa’s most recent works, completed in the year before the coronavirus pandemic shattered the mirror of contemporary art in March 2020, will command our attention for the remainder of this text. One appears in the other, and both acted as centrepieces for Elsa’s work in Super Black, an Arts Council Collection National Partners programme exhibition, at Colchester’s Firstsite gallery in the second half of 2019.

10. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-55234768

The film *Black Girl Essex: Here We Come, Look We Here* of 2019 brings together the many threads in Elsa's practice to date. It's a remarkable performance, with Elsa at the port of Tilbury carrying the other work that we must mention – her specially made *Black Essex Flag* of 2019. The framing of Elsa, in a glittering pistachio-green carnival outfit, walking across a bridge near to the Tilbury ticket hall where the first passengers disembarked from the Windrush in 1948, is astonishing; perhaps the single most powerful image of her from this recent hectic round of production. Sensitively filmed, the work uses a backing soundtrack of steel band and carnival music, in addition to a strong narrative element, capturing the voices of successive generations of black folk who have lived and made lives in Essex. The film also makes the important point that the origins of the post-war black communities in England are in Tilbury, Essex, not only London, as has somehow become assumed in more shallow narratives of this topic.

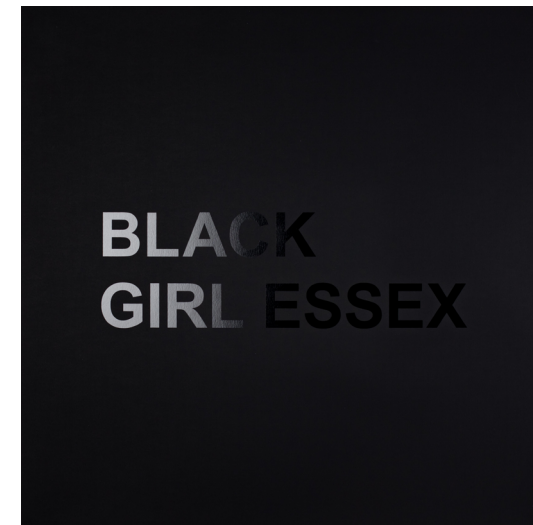
This is a layered and touching film, merging art, dance, music; a fusion of the individual performance against the rich historical residue of over seventy years, three generations of lived experience. There is again this relationship between Elsa as performer *exemplifying* the differing stories that we hear in the film; between individual and community. The emphasis, though, is on the metaphor of carnival, its persistence and its rich promise of liberation.

The black Essex flag is a striking element in the film. Traditionally, the county flag of Essex is three silver cutlasses on a red background: a familiar emblem from local government, and the badge of the county cricket club. Elsa's turning of the flag to black, with the swords glittering through the surface, is an overwriting of familiar norms with an unapologetic and proud subversion. This is a remarkable decolonial turn in the work, a symbol of appropriating a familiar historic Essex symbol and suggesting a new awareness of multiple narratives and layers of contestation and difference.

The methodology revealed in the flag is taken from the series of Black-on-Black works entitled *The Blackness Series* from 2016 onward, and most recently in an exhibition at the Beecroft gallery in Southend, entitled *Policy Making*. This most recent work in this exhibition *Policy No1. Disrupt*



Policy No.1 Disrupt The Existing Narrative
Installation view with Black Essex Flag, Policy Making: Beecroft Art Gallery.
Image: Anna Lukala, 2020



Work No. 4: Hey, we're over here
Silkscreen on Plika black 330g paper 70 x 70 cm, Edition of 3 + 1 AP.
Image: Anna Lukala, 2021

the Existing Narratives (2020)¹¹ revolves around visibility and invisibility, who is seen and not seen in visual culture; making use of a strategy of making text work, printed in black on black, difficult to read so that the spectator is forced to uncover the words through squinting their eyes, and remember them through the effort made; a way of undermining complacent orthodoxies on race.

In the first year of COVID one of the major global news events has been the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, who was jailed after a high-profile trial on 23 April 2021, after being found guilty of this crime. The outpouring of rage across the world that resulted from this event, and the renewed focus on the treatment of black people in western societies by police and other competent authorities, and a renewed and passionate debate surrounding the historical injustices and criminalities associated with slavery and colonialism, have brought the key themes of Elsa's work into a very sharp focus. Floyd's murder – and the violent deaths of Breanna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery either through police bungling or the actions of white racists, have given renewed impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement, and brought racial inequalities and injustice into painful focus for the first time for a generation of younger activists. Reflecting on the intense global response to these events, the artist actually began to see some hope, after long periods of feeling that black communities in the UK suffer daily micro-aggressions amidst a general indifference. Elsa observed:

“You know, black bodies have been murdered for centuries. But this particular murder, when the world was “locked down”, has pricked up the ears of white people around the world, even as far as Russia. And so now, suddenly, young white people are *actually* saying Black Lives Matter and *actually* talking about white fragility...this can only be a positive move in the right direction.”¹²

In this essay we have uncovered the work of Elsa James as a layered and responsive practice animated by differing motivations and tensions. We have noted her work as having deep roots in her upbringing, her drive to

11. www.elsajames.com/disrupt-the-existing-narratives

12. Conversation with Elsa James, 4 December 2020

understand and engage with her Caribbean heritage and the implications of that in a very specific territory such as Essex. The recent work has been animated by a significant interest on recovering, or telling for the first time, the stories of Essex's black communities, and how these relate to issues of race and identity in the wider UK. This is a practice that engages further with key preoccupations in contemporary art, the decolonial and the process of demodernising.

There is a dynamic interaction between the individual performer, historically inhabiting or haunting of re-constructed figures, and socially engaged art seeking to use these re-constructions as a means of engaging with a community in the round. It is a practice that uses dramatic, understated confrontation as a means of uncovering the consequences of historical prejudice and exclusion, and the uncomfortable echoes of those past attitudes in our own time. Having acquired in recent years collaborations across disciplines – with historians, archivists, activists, VR technicians – this is a body of work that seems set to grow exponentially in the years after the shackles of the pandemic have been released from us all.

Jon Blackwood

Jon Blackwood is a Reader in Contemporary Art at Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. He has curated exhibitions internationally and is the author of several books on contemporary art. A key research interest is contemporary art and “peripherality”: the production, consumption and discussion of art beyond the metropolitan centres.

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