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Made in Thamesmead: archiving the migration and settlement of the African-Caribbean communities in Thamesmead through animation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of animation to examine the migration of the African and Caribbean communities in relation to social injustices that threaten connection, belonging, and citizenship. Theories by Paul Gilroy support the practice-based research methodology, positioning animation as a representational and archival tool for recording black British history. *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) illustrates how migration has shaped the progressive, cultural landscape of modern Britain. It illuminates the need to include stories on the black experience in locally based community archives, creating strategies that challenge the ways that racist social imaginaries continue to prevent social change.

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Introduction

This project aims to critically analyse the lack of representation of African and Caribbean histories in community archives, focusing on the Thamesmead Community Archive. Scholarly ideas around the representation of race in film and animation are used as a critical framework to evaluate the problem. I employ Paul Gilroy's discussion on the *black Atlantic* and *postcolonial melancholia* and Stuart Hall's discussions on cultural identity and cinematic representation. These are used to explore how animation can address the problem of exclusion, thus contributing to producing an accurate representation of black British history and culture within community archives.

In investigating the use of animation as an archival tool, I revisit hooks' concept of the *black aesthetic* to demonstrate that animation practice can build upon initiatives such as the Black Arts Movement. The article discusses my approach to intersecting animated experiments with archival material and uses it as a documentary mode of investigation. I also incorporated interviews from the residents of Thamesmead, providing a platform for marginalised voices.

This project is making a contribution to British animation studies, where black history is currently underrepresented. It uses animation to inform new ideas and approaches that

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explore the mechanisms of decolonisation, anti-racism, and inclusivity within the academic discipline.

The paper consists of three sections. The first section summarises the history and background of the migration of the black African and Caribbean communities into Thamesmead. The second section discusses the methods used to develop and produce the final animated film. The third and final section is centred on the discussion of the literature used as a critical lens to support the methodological approach to the study.

Made in Thamesmead (2024) is a hybrid of animation and documentary, known as an animated documentary. This practice-based project was prompted by my encounter with the archive, conflicted by the absence of a strong physical presence of the African and Caribbean communities within the Thamesmead Community Archive. To address this problem, the potential benefits of using animation to explore histories that have not been well documented, excluded, and misrepresented will be explored. The voices of marginalised groups amplify and disrupt the power structures that continue to exist in the archives. The film becomes a living archive that connects the past with the present.

Historical backdrop of black settlement in Thamesmead

Prior to making the film, it was important for me to reflect on the history of the migration of black African and Caribbean communities more generally in the UK. The history is vast; therefore, I can only provide a summary that outlines the basis of the contextual background for this work. The cultural landscape of Britain is continuously evolving, and migration has and continues to play a role in this shift. London continues to expand along with the blend of various identities and cultures.

Hakim Adi discusses in this book *West Africans in Britain: 1900-1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and communism* on the hidden history of West Africans in Britain as early as Roman Britain. It must be noted that Africans have been migrating to Britain pre-eighteenth century for work and education and also as a result of enslavement and exploitation. (Adi, 2023). This project focuses on the migration of Ghanaians, Nigerians, and Jamaicans to Thamesmead from the 1970s, around 10 years after Thamesmead was built.

Caribbean migrants were involved in fighting racialised injustices in Britain from around the 1950s, representing the impending colonial separation from several countries. They were subjected to racially motivated attacks, barriers to employment, housing, and leisure facilities. Anti-blackness views and behaviours prevented and hindered many Caribbean people from thriving after they settled.

There was also a need to rebuild many aspects of the urban environment following World War II, leading to the journey made to the United Kingdom by some members of the Windrush Generation from 1948, as detailed in the novel *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy to the United Kingdom. West Africans also migrated during the British Colonial Rule; some were motivated by educational factors. Postcolonial writers such as Wole Soyinka and Buchi Emecheta have written about their own experiences of the impacts of colonialism on migration, in the novel *Telephone Conversation* (1962) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974). Both works address the negative treatment of the black communities that arrived in the UK from the former British colonies. The black British community was built on overt and traumatising structures of racism. The societal racism manifested institutionally, impacting education, housing, and employment. As a result of ongoing tensions, resistance was formed through riots and collectives. The Notting Hill Race Riots (1958) were a result of ongoing tensions between

African-Caribbean immigrants and white working-class residents. The activist members of The Mangrove Nine (1970) were repeatedly subjected to racial harassment by the Metropolitan police. The Brixton Riot (1981) was a result of the ongoing racial tensions between the Metropolitan Police and black youths. Riots also occurred as a result of the New Cross Fire (1981), in which the Metropolitan police failed to thoroughly investigate the cause of the fire that took the lives of 13 black and black mixed-heritage youths.

The architectural landscape of London was being formulated with new design principles aimed at fulfilling many social needs. This often excluded the black London community, who were repeatedly denied access to social housing. The documentary *Nubia Way* (2022) highlights that some members of the black community living in the London Borough of Lewisham built their own houses in 1990 as an act of resistance in response to social housing discrimination. The hostility across the UK as a whole would leave an entire race questioning their sense of belonging and a place to call home, which resulted in displacement and feelings of fear. According to Rhodes and Brown, 'the "inner city" has existed as a racialised space acting as shorthand for a range of socio-political contestations sutured by "race", animating post-war political discourse and urban policy.' (Rhodes & Brown, 2019, p. 3243).

Thamesmead is located in South East London and straddles the boundaries of the London Borough of Greenwich and the London Borough of Bexley. It is also within close proximity to Abbey Wood. I was first acquainted with the area of Thamesmead in 2016 when working on another project commissioned by Peabody Housing Association, the Arts Council England, and the Royal Borough of Greenwich. *Wish You Were Here* (2016) is a short experimental film exploring the past, present, and plans for Thamesmead, which has been under redevelopment since around 2015.

Emerging from the post-war development of London, this was one of many architectural projects that sought to respond to an urgent need: the lack of homes and the strong need for affordable housing. The suburban Brutalist architecture comprised high-rise and lower buildings, with an infrastructure joined by elevated walkways and under paths. The design and build included amenities such as corner shops, a post office, a pub, and playgrounds. Peabody, a not-for-profit housing association, owns much land in Thamesmead and is committed to leading the regeneration with contributions from residents, using arts and culture to bring the community together. Peabody's new vision is thus aligned with its founder, George Peabody, who created the Peabody Trust in 1862, seeking to alleviate poverty and social injustice through affordable housing.

Built on former marshland, Thamesmead, the New Town of the 1960s, could be seen as a visionary landscape of work. Surrounded by nature, lakes, and woodlands, it was very different from the more built-up areas of the urban cityscape. Despite this, it failed to live up to its utopian vision, as the practicalities of living within the parameters of the design became socially restrictive. Markowitz states that, 'from the start, policymakers and designers neglected to consider the interplay between space and politics. They erred in treating residents as a homogenous whole rather than individuals with distinct needs and aspirations who would make the neighbourhood their own' (Markowitz, 2017).

Based on the interviews conducted, I was able to conclude that the first migration of Jamaicans would have been towards the end of the 1970s. The earliest photos in the Thamesmead Community Archive were provided by a retired teacher and Head of Science at a secondary school in Thamesmead and were dated 1978.

Materials and methods

In documenting the experiences of others, it is essential to consider the role that both representation and identity play in the unfolding process of historical events that are sometimes misunderstood. This can help highlight how animation can be very effective as a collaborative tool to address social, political, and economic injustice. It also has excellent potential to make connections between the past and present. Building upon these ideas, this project discusses the use of community archive material and the lack of representation of certain marginalised groups in this environment. Finally, it offers some insights into how animation can activate and intersect stories hidden beneath the surface of modern society.

This section discusses the methods used in this study. The approach creates an understanding of the function of animated film as a method of knowledge preservation. It contributes to understanding the African and Caribbean communities' contribution to shaping modern Britain's cultural landscape.

The archival material was sourced from the London Community Video Archive, which features interviews with adult and child residents of Thamesmead in the 1980s who discuss their experiences of the racial tensions in the area. Photographs were provided by two retired British documentary photographers who captured the anti-BNP protests in the 1990s, including following the deaths of Stephen Lawrence, Rohit Duggal, and Rolan Adams. A retired secondary school teacher shared photographs of his former students who studied at the Riverside School in the 1970s.

All of the participants I interviewed are residents of Thamesmead and Abbey Wood. Two of them were women of Caribbean descent from Jamaica (Participants 1 and 2). One was a man of African descent from Nigeria (Participant 3). The participants moved into the area from the 1970s to the 1990s, representing three waves of migration. The participants were also deemed the most suitable because they had been actively involved in the community, working as a councillor, an activist, an educator, and a youth worker. Their presence in the community would provide a deeper insight into the history and experiences of the area.

The interview questions were semi-structured, and the participants were informed beforehand that they could deviate from the set questions. Two participants shared personal stories from their upbringing, and another shared information about the history of their home. The questions were selected to discover information about past events omitted from the community archive.

Participant 1 was born in a small northern town called Wolverhampton in England and moved to Thamesmead in 1979. She recalls that

'she and her family were a handful of black residents in our area and even fewer in our local school, Riverside. When I was at school, we were let out early because of the racial problems we were having in Thamesmead. (Participant 1, February 2022)

Participant 2 was born in Jamaica but lived in another part of the UK before moving to Abbey Wood in 1989. She reflects on how she was first unaware of the racial undertones in the area that subsequently led to the murder of Rolan Adams. She states that:

when the Roland Adams incident occurred, I think that was definitely a wakeup call for me. And I think my understanding is he had actually seen a female youth safely home in

Thamesmead or partway home and then he was then going to get the bus to go home with his brother back because he lived in Abbey Wood. (Participant 2, February 2022)

Participant 3 stated that he had lived in Thamesmead for fifteen years during the interview. He mentioned, 'I thought England was a place where you can find all different people. I have Turkish, Brazilian, Jamaican, and Irish. It's only when we came here that the spectrum starts to lose its difference.' (Participant 3, February 2022)

The impact of segregated schools, as highlighted by interview participant 1, was that members of the black community were denied the fundamental right to education. Participant 1 recalls how their older siblings were removed from the mainstream educational system and sent to what was termed a "special needs" school. These schools were attended by those with learning needs deemed unsupported at the mainstream state schools. At the time, these schools would not teach according to the national curriculum, and pupils often left education without formal training or qualifications.

One of the participants recalls how her high performance in track and field meant that she could remain at a mainstream school. Having migrated from Jamaica with her family, other children and teachers often teased her for having an accent. She recalls that as a child, she felt that she was continuously fighting for her life, as racism was a daily occurrence both inside and outside of school.

In animation, the movement is drawn or constructed and is often thought of as a time-consuming process. Animation has visualised people's movement, ideas, presence, and history. It can visually capture the nuances of the historical journey explored in this study.

Edwin Carels defines animation as 'the art of the interval, depending upon the eyes and the open mind of the viewer. Ultimately, it is a matter of spectatorship ... Animation, according to McLaren, is the art of the invisible becoming visible in the mind' (Cook & Thomas, 2006, p. 14). And in the case of this study, animation brings to light the invisible history of the African and Caribbean communities.

Animation as a form of documentation can become an archive, as it records the movement of events. As Paul Wells states,

animated documentary constantly articulates and illustrates the tensions between recording and being a creative outcome. It also inherently deals with the idea of itself as the archive. In working with – and often, actively producing – this 'flux' of change as its subject, animation echoes and reflects the very things it records. (Wells, 2019, p. 117)

The combined use of animation and archive footage has been widely used within the sub-genre of animation. Prominent feature-length animations such as *Waltz with Bashir*, directed by Ari Folman (2008) and *Flee*, directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen (2021), explore themes of a sensitive nature, using the archive to emphasise the importance of past events and fragmented memories. In *Photograph of Jesus*, directed by Laurie Hill (2009), archive material is integrated with stop-motion animation, bringing to life the still images from the Hulton Archives. *Start with a Place*, by Gisela Mulindwa (2024), is an animated collage of archival images that reveal how gentrification has transformed parts of South London.

The research for this study used licensed material from the Community London Video Archives, Thamesmead Community Archive, and the archival images of two documentary photographers of social protests and movements. The mixed media approach with animation as a collage emphasised the complexities faced when making work that deals

with issues surrounding erasure, redaction, and denial. Information was drawn from several sources to develop a visual narrative of the past and present. Similarly, animator Osbert Parker's experimental animated films *Life on the Move* (2019) and *Timeline* (2021) combine stop-motion animation of archive photos with live action footage. Both films explore the migration of African and Caribbean communities in the UK. *Life on the Move* (2019) visualises the various reasons controlling how and why people move across borders. Parker intertwines the personal journeys of refugees from their homeland with the stop-motion animation, with small figurines moving across various maps. *Timeline* (2021) uses stop-motion animation to depict four hundred years of immigration into Britain.

The insight for my methodology has primarily been achieved from my observation of the evolving cultural landscapes and architectural history from when I was living in Thamesmead. Being socially engaged, my practice has always focused on how I can combine animation with experimental moving images. For this documentary approach, I decided it was essential to include archive material, develop a tool for activism, and strengthen my arguments on using animation as an archival tool. The visuals were used to encourage reflection, interconnecting three narratives told across three separate decades, the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Three participants of black African and Caribbean heritage could recall their families' migration into the United Kingdom and then eventually to London. Most importantly, this revealed three different experiences of racism.

Drawing upon abstract methods from my creative practice, I discovered new interactions between the participants' lived experiences and the audience. Making these connections through the gathered material and narrative structure revealed that animation can work as a provocative tool that can represent complex topics, untold stories, and use the past to visualise an evolving social landscape.

I used an audio recording device to interview the participants, emphasising their voice and lived experience and providing some level of anonymity. This technique was used in the animated documentary, *In Jennifer's Room* (2012), where a voice actor replaces Jennifer's voice to protect her identity due to the sensitive nature of the film. According to Bones,

In many instances, it becomes crucial for the director to maintain the anonymity of the participants' involvement and the sources used. This blanket of anonymity can provide safety both physically and emotionally. Anonymous interviews are not a new concept within documentary, but long gone are the days of a vague black silhouette sitting on screen speaking through a grainy voice changer. This allows socially threatened individuals like Jennifer to come forward with their stories while the animation allows them to be captivating and engaging visually. (Bones, 2019, p. 7)

In engaging with factual content, animation as a form of documentary has made a cultural shift by using a widely received mainstream visual medium to confront other aspects of our society. In what Ehrlich calls 'post-truth', she affirms that animation can shape and portray reality and attributes the reason for the cultural shift of animation combined with documentary to techno culture, and what she defines as the evolution of society, culture, and technology concerning representation. (Ehrlich, 2021). In making *Made in Thamesmead* (2024), which spans over three years, I observed how the three participants

felt more comfortable sharing their stories and experiences with me, knowing they would not be on camera. The questions were centred around their emotional experiences and feelings of community, connection, and belonging.

Animation can be understood as a language of representation. This represents a visual analysis formulated around what exists in the real world, although what we see can be fabricated and an illusion. An image or a sequence of images can reveal some level of truth and confirm some facts. However, beyond the surface lies a deeper understanding of this reality, and animated documentaries can bring to light the things that cannot always be seen. Animation can support the sensitive nature of some of the testimonies participants shared with me.

Testimonies of black lived experiences

Reflecting on the work of The British Black Arts Movement (1982) and the visual media work of the Black Audio Film Collective (1982–1998), they too discovered experimental methods to explore black culture in Britain. In particular, John Akomfrah's *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) uses poetry, video, and photographs, focusing on Stuart Hall's work on forming identities. For many, new identities are formed when migration has been prompted by war and conflict. The emotional journey required in creating a new and evolving identity is often overlooked when people start a new life in a country that is very different from their cultural background.

In the backdrop of increasing rental prices in London from the noughties, many West African communities were gravitating towards living in Thamesmead for affordability reasons. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the 177 bus, which runs from Peckham to Thamesmead, South East London. These two areas have the highest population of West Africans in London. Participant 3 mapped these movements both within London and from other parts of the diaspora with the bus route, stating that,



Figure 1. Still from *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) Bus from Peckham to Thamesmead ©Mary Martins.

I moved from Peckham to Thamesmead when I was twelve. There's literally a straight route from where I used to live to here. I could walk out of that door, walk to the 177 bus stop and get 177 all the way to Thamesmead. So that 177 route is like a symbolic route of transition. You'll see a high pattern of people of African descent always on those buses, because of those routes. I think those routes represent some sort of route to migration from Africa, Caribbean, into London, England, then to areas in London and that diversity. (Participant 3, 2022)

The bus 177 takes passengers past Peckham (SE15), New Cross (SE14), Deptford (SE8), Greenwich (SE10), Charlton (SE7), Woolwich (SE18), Plumstead (SE18), and Thamesmead (SE28). These specific London postcodes not only map people's movement but also highlight how people create a sense of belonging and camaraderie when they move together.

The worlds created due to migration can be explored through the market stalls selling items such as yams and plantains. These are areas with clusters of people creating new communities and finding ways to remain connected to their identity and culture.

Figure 2 was inspired by the conversation with Participant 2 about her mother when she arrived to the United Kingdom from Jamaica during the interview for the film.

Participant 2 stated,

I think I was left as a baby, and then when my mother earned enough, she sent for me and my elder sister, so when we arrived here, there was a squadron of kids. You know, we had brothers and sisters, mum had grapes. (Participant 2, 2022)

Certain parts of London are clustered with African-Caribbean hair shops and salons that emerged during post-war Britain and subsequently as a result of migration. The film is created around the sensitivities of the topic of racism. I do not intend for the illustration to be an exact or accurate representation of the person in question. However, the animation uses humour to engage the audience with the memory of when the participant migrated to the United Kingdom, as she laughs when recalling the story. The child-like



Figure 2. Still from *Made in Thamesmead* (2024), Illustration of the interviewed participant's mother, ©Mary Martins.

character feels nervous about being in an unfamiliar area, having relocated with her older sister from Jamaica. It was also used to create a mental image that the audience can connect with: a popular Afro hairstyle, often associated with people of African and Caribbean descent from the 1970s.

Black lives across the London diaspora held no value or significance, and race was seen as an invasion of Britain. Gilroy explores the:

sophisticated theory of culture into the political analysis of “race” and racism in Britain by claiming the term back from ethnicity. The active, dynamic aspects of cultural life have been emphasised. This is a calculated challenge to the absolutist definitions of “race” and ethnicity which are shared by contemporary racism, a substantial current in the sociology of “race”, and much liberal anti-racism. (Gilroy, 2013, p. 4)

Made in Thamesmead (2024) captures aspects of Black British history that were either forgotten, overlooked, or replaced. Prompted by the lack of visibility in the Thamesmead Community archive, these entangled stories are still connected to colonial history. They are memories and experiences that have contributed to forming a sense of identity in the black communities living in Thamesmead.

Music was central to my approach and method. According to hooks, ‘making and listening to Black music, both secular and sacred, was one of the ways Black folks developed an aesthetic’ (hooks, 2009, p. 125). Figure 3 demonstrates the use of visual music created by abstract animators. These abstract gestures are visual representations of the emotional journey that the participants have taken. The images are layered with originally composed Afro-Beat music created by a local music producer from Thamesmead. Traditional abstract animators of the avant-garde film period produced hand-painted images directly onto 16 mm and 35 mm film as visual representations of Jazz music. The relationship between music and culture was essential for me to consider, as Gilroy highlights how music and sound created a shared experience from across the black Atlantic.



Figure 3. Still from *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) View of Southmere Lake. ©Mary Martins.

Figure 3 illustrates the technique called 'direct animation' where I painted onto 16 mm film using ink, similarly to the work of Len Lye. Ward describes Lye's visual aesthetic as

Abstract patterns and shifting rhythms are a clear link to a more modernist, experimental tradition of filmmaking ... Lye uses found footage from other GPO documentary films showing aspects of trade and industry. These were then 'creatively interpreted' via colour optical printing and other techniques; Lye also added some abstract patterns and playful captions over some of the original footage and an up-tempo soundtrack. The result is a kinetic paean to the hustle and bustle of trade, where the animation techniques used literally seem to 'bring to life' this apparently everyday activity. (Ward, 2005, p. 83)

Animation falls within the broader sense of moving image. Like migration, it is the act of moving and evolving. For decades, the black British community has engaged in developing various political, cultural, and social movements that have sought to activate change. Although many of these movements now cease to exist, dissolving into the past, the legacy of their work continues to permeate and shape the lives of those who live in the United Kingdom today.

Animation uses a series of images to visualise the unfolding of time. The movement of these images can also be understood as life unfolding. 'The question surrounding movement emphasises a central aspect in the discussion of animation's indexicality, for it foregrounds the issue of animation as an illusion of life or indeed life itself in new ways in digital culture' (Ehrlich, 2021, p. 60). Through storytelling, animators connect and construct the changes we want to see in the world. Historically, social movements and campaigns have fought against the continued struggle against social injustice through collective political action. Gilroy himself addresses how black settlers in Britain were forced into decades of a political community, through police brutality that led to the formation of the 'Black diaspora'.

Made in Thamesmead can be generally understood as a documentary that applies experimental film techniques with animation and addresses the vast amount and the complex layers surrounding the racial tensions and resistance forming from the 1980s and 1990s. This has been unravelled about the movement and presence of the African and Caribbean community and, in particular, the political movements that formed as a result of the deaths of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and Rolan Adams in 1991. This practice-based research project has incorporated multiform artworks reflecting on the residents' voices to promote the learning of black British history and culture.

The internationally recognised visual artist, Barbara Walker, has used her practice to confront the absence of black representation within the British national archives. Frank Bowling has used abstraction to explore the feelings and experiences of trauma and loss experienced by the black British community. Taking inspiration from the work of these practitioners, *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) uses a visual language that combines the literal with the abstract to construct the actual events as they occurred. This takes the viewer into a memory or recollection based on the participant's subjective experience. The abstract explores what it means to be black at a time when being black often meant living in fear and frustration.

Through animation, I have explored how it can address complex and seldom addressed issues within British society and across the African diaspora. *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) produces an aesthetic reflective of the problems identified by Walker and Bowling. It reveals the truth through the personal testimonies of three local residents who migrated

to the area and experienced trauma as a result. This emotional diasporic experience is not always shared publicly, and is an account of three out of many other black experiences that are not accessible within community archives. Animation is a tool that can be used to reveal personal truths, and according to Stuart Hall's theory on representation and identity, it can assist in comprehending how these individual stories shape who we are.

Made in Thamesmead reveals the experiences of racism, often challenging to voice and process by those affected by these issues. The experimental nature of animation provides the freedom to creatively explore, address, and confront these issues through a medium that can be more accessible to a broader audience. The tactile nature of analogue filmmaking connects to the physical truth of these stories; they are no longer in the minds of those who experience them. They are preserved through the negatives, the abstraction of images that dance across the screen, highlighting that the past is the present, and the present is also in the past.

In *Made in Thamesmead*, I redefine the material of reality, juxtaposing 16 mm footage of Thamesmead over the edited interviews from the participants. There is no direct relation between what they say and what the audience sees, apart from the visuals representing their environment. The audience can make indirect connections to the space. Still, it encourages greater engagement with the audio narrative and is structured to produce a deeper reflective response to the personal stories. It can also be interpreted as what Ehrlich describes as the 'aesthetic of the real' and the questions around epistemology that this method may produce. And although much of my practice is concerned with the use of analogue, the materiality and textures of film appear less fabricated and 'perfect' than those associated with some digital work. The grains and marks are imperfect, much like society and humanity, but they also resemble the blurred, disjointed, and shaky current political and social climate across the world.

The overall objective of the style was to confront the complexities of racism in British society. This allowed me to focus much of my efforts on adding to the broader discourse around animated documentary and the benefits of animation in depicting the lived experiences and stories of marginalised groups. I have used animation as a living archive to reinforce Rebecca Adams' view that:

archives can be a key source in gaining a better insight into past societies. The role of archive services and the archivist is to collect, appraise and preserve societal memory and provide access to collections for all sections of society. (Adi, 2023, p. 232)

We also never see the contributors' photographic images, as they too are animated. Again, traditional 2D animation techniques connect the audience to the textural and tangibility of the people as they invite the audience into their memories and past experiences. The film presents photographs captured by retired documentary photographers of the anti-BNP protests, one of several historic moments of cultural resistance organised by communities in post-war Britain. A newspaper clipping documenting a racist attack and murder is scanned and used as a background for a photographic image of Rohit Duggal, who was murdered at the age of 15 in 1992 in Woolwich, South East London. The protests depicted in the animation convey a collective pain and trauma stemming from the ongoing racism experienced by the British African, Caribbean, and Asian communities.

In uniting aesthetics and social resistance, I refer to the practice as an experimental documentary as it combines mixed visual media, creating a broader context of what is considered to be an animated documentary. Ehrlich (2021) asserts that animated documentaries can effectively adopt a political goal, one of activism. The experimentation with new approaches to theoretical and cultural contexts, shifting away from the alignment with a perceived artificial form of entertainment. Since animation can only be seen on screen rather than in the physical realm, it is ostensibly distinguished from photography: the argument follows that animation is generated. At the same time, photographs are recorded (Ehrlich, 2021, p. 10). Animation is a useful tool to confront the increasing complexities of the past and how we see the world.

The film includes images of the anti-BNP (British National Party) protest in Eltham following the murder of Rolan Adams in 1991. Animation has been layered over archival and these photographic images as the audience revisits the painful past of the black community that suffered from many losses. The film weaves together images of social justice protests in London in the 1990s, as Adi states, 'it is important for us to remember the history of how we got to where we are today and to be aware of the struggles that have been waged by our predecessors to get us here' (Adi, 2023, p. 243). In an attempt to create a visual method that focuses on increasing the visibility and presence of the black British communities across the entire landscape of Britain, the archive has no beginning and no end; it is representative of the past, present, and future.

Literature and discussion

The film was made by first developing an overarching critical lens through examining bell hooks' concept of the *aesthetic movement*, Stuart Hall's discussion on *cultural representation*, and Paul Gilroy's concept of the *black Atlantic*. This was used to generate an understanding of how animation can intersect with the history of the migration of black African and Caribbean communities in Thamesmead.

These concepts will be discussed in parallel with animation theorist Charles daCosta's work and how animation can represent themes of belonging and connection. Concurrently, I will address the problem surrounding the lack of representation in animation that reflects the lived experiences of black British people.

In the exhibition *Room to Breathe* and the subsequent event *TalkingART Lates: Animating Migration* held at the Migration Museum, British animator Kate Anderson discussed and screened a body of her films that explored themes surrounding migration. (Migration Museum, 2019). The series entitled *At The Kitchen Table: Stories of Migration and Resilience* (2019) consisted of an installation piece, which was part-animated and part live action, that was based on the personal stories of three people who had recently arrived in the UK. Through these testimonies, animation draws the audience into the emotional journey that migrants often face as they embark on building a new life, concurrently navigating their way around the challenges that they face.

To reexamine black history and formulate an understanding of British identity through the animation, I explored Gilroy's concept of the *black Atlantic*, in which he situates the *black Atlantic* into the hybrid cultures that formed due to transatlantic slavery. The diasporic identities from America, Britain, and the Caribbean, collectively developed into a form of black consciousness that is fighting against European fascism and the dominance of

white culture. The racism experienced during the differing times and periods of the migration and movement of the black communities contributed significantly to the erasure of their presence and lack of acknowledgement of their contribution towards the creation of the rich cultural landscape of the modern British society.

Gilroy unpacks the complexities of modern British society through how black British settlers make racial prejudice a multi-layered problem that permeates all structures of society. Within Gilroy's scholarly revelation of the relationship between race, culture, nationality, class, and urban social movements, he states that 'the countercultures and subcultures of black Britain may have held the movement together at certain crucial moments. They provide, among other things, important rituals which allow their affiliates to recognise each other and celebrate their coming together' (Gilroy, 2013, p. 304).

Gilroy asserted that colonial attitudes persist in how black and brown postcolonial immigrants are viewed and treated in Britain, even after the previously colonised countries had gained their independence (Gilroy, 2022). Gilroy's concept of the *black Atlantic* diaspora draws upon the continuities in how the black culture is perceived in popular culture, specifically how the black experience is documented. It is essential to consider how this can support the use of animation not as an archival tool, but as a window into the complexities of black British lives.

Furthermore, Gilroy's concept of *convivial culture* (Gilroy, 2004) draws attention to the hostility towards asylum seekers, Muslims, and Eastern European immigration. The colonial ideologies that stem from the dominant nature of the representation of Western culture in the media are also evident within the British animation industry and contemporary practice. Gilroy affirms that:

we must therefore confront the extent to which the cultural politics of "race" reveals conflict over the production of urban meanings and situate the meanings which have already been identified as constitutive of "race" in their proper place as contending definitions of what city life is about. (Gilroy, 2013, p. 311)

Therefore, animation can disrupt some of these historical ideas of Britishness that have led to the marginalisation of specific communities.

Communities are where people come together, bound by shared interests, values, and beliefs. In opposition to the violent attempts to dismantle the power structures that leave entire groups of people oppressed, hooks highlighted that 'without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination — imperialism, sexism, racism, classism' (hooks, 2006, p. 289). hooks looks at how the intersections of a person's identity influence how they are perceived in the media. These misconceptions form the foundational basis for injustice in our society. These intersections also help to recognise systems of oppression that are covert, as well as those that have festered over time.

According to hooks, film can alter how we see the world. And animation, which I will demonstrate and highlight throughout this final film, aims to create new worlds. These worlds are structures of the imagination and constructs of personal and collective experiences. hooks states that 'aesthetics ... is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming. It is not organic' (hooks, 2009, p. 122). Therefore, the primary objective of the final film

is to use animation as a reflexive and speculative tool, formulating new narratives of stories that have been ignored and/or forgotten. hooks' exploration of the *black aesthetic* has continued to act as a profoundly political mechanism that supports the black liberation struggle and movement. Animation can link fantasy and reality, the past and the present.

According to hooks,

art was seen as intrinsically serving a political function. Whatever African-Americans created in music, dance, poetry, painting, etc., it was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilised, and that the measure of this was our collective failure to create "great" art. (hooks, 2009, p. 123)

In subtle ways, *Made in Thamesmead* can be understood as a visual recollection of some of the painful and traumatic, racially motivated incidents that occurred during the migration of the African and Caribbean communities into Thamesmead. It also explores the political function and responsibility of art when responding to violence and displacement that is racially motivated.

The visuals created in *Made in Thamesmead* represent the physical and emotional experiences resulting from migration. For the past need not disappear or be forgotten, and archived animation allows crafting a narrative that can be shared with many others for generations to come. This sentiment is echoed by Rebecca Adams, who believes that 'where there was once a lack of diverse voices within the archive, there is now a growing awareness of the value of archives to highlight marginalised voices' (Adi, 2023, p. 232).

In an attempt to reshape the hierarchical power dynamics highlighted by Stuart Hall and further illuminated by animator Charles daCosta, I argue that animation can be implemented to reframe the social systems constructed to resist the presence of the African and Caribbean Communities.

The film used various layers of abstract animation techniques to highlight the emotional experiences felt by those impacted by the oppressive nature of racism as a result of their emigration. hooks affirms that the 'decolonisation process is a critical intervention and interrogation of existing repressive and dominating structures' (hooks, 2009, p. 131). This is important for disrupting past narratives and addressing the feelings of exclusion and isolation that accompany the migration of people. Working with existing archive material, I intersected historical images with the present to emphasise the ongoing journey to create a more inclusive and accurate reflection of modern British society. Gilroy contends that 'race has become a marker for the activity of urban social movements and their conflict with urban political systems and state institutions' (Gilroy, 2013, p. 312).

Representation of blackness and marginalisation in animation

The lack of discussions around race and representation within the broader context of animation studies has also been identified within the scholarly work of animation theorist and practitioner Charles daCosta. daCosta's work has applied Stuart Hall's discussion around representation, particularly his post-structural theory of representation and the

intersectional identity theory. daCosta used this to critically examine the representation of black people within contemporary British animation.

According to Hall, the work of representation is to

give meaning to things through language. This is how you 'make sense of' the world of people, objects and events, and how you are able to express a complex thought about those things to other people, or communicate about them through language in ways which other people are able to understand. (Hall, 2013, p. 3)

The presence of the black lived experience in animation production in the United Kingdom has continued to be underrepresented until more recent interest from major animation companies producing work that focuses on the culture of African people. Despite the perceived notion of multiculturalism in the United Kingdom, daCosta (2007) argues that the presence of African and Caribbean cultures within mainstream television shows produced by the large animation studios is underrepresented. This has deepened the marginalisation and removal of a group of people and their contribution to British society.

Hall's view on the representation of black people within the media questions whether the dominant force of power can use this power to control the racial and systematic ideologies that essentially form the mass interpretation of events that occur in the world. An example of this can be understood through how the media creates a negative view and reaction to the migration of people. We, therefore, cannot always ascertain and extract one true meaning from an event or situation. Many factors, such as the economic and educational factors, will determine how this is received. This is where the control of mass animation production can be positioned, highlighting the benefits of using animation as a powerful tool for interrogation and activism and supporting the affinity of collective change.

daCosta further argues that multiculturalism in Britain cannot exist against the backdrop of the very hierarchies that create and deepen racial oppression and racial inequality. The façade of multicultural Britain was exposed by the immigration legislation laws that further marginalised the British African and Caribbean communities; for example, when the Home Office immigration enforcement targets areas where predominantly members of the black and Global Majority reside and the racially motivated use of stop and search on youths. And the requesting for immigration papers from members of the community as proof of British citizenship or indefinite leave to remain.

daCosta explores how, through integrated theory and practice, racial stereotyping has been deconstructed to ensure that the representation and contextualisation of the experiences of black people can be accurately conveyed.

Artists and filmmakers across the diaspora have intertwined art practices such as photography and fine art to tackle the lack of representation of black people. Using film, sound, archives, and performance, British-Ghanaian artist Larry Achiampong explores the lasting impact of colonisation. In his sculptural work with traditional Wax fabric called *The Wanderer* (2007), while British-Nigerian Artist Yinka Shonibare explores memory, identity, and migration from the legacies of colonialism through colonial architecture.

There is very minimal research into animation that explores the intersection of race and identity. Animation, a multi-million pound industry in the UK that works across themes

and genres for adults and children, has been produced only in the last decade by major media outlets such as BBC animations, focusing on African-Caribbean lives. In recent years, Disney and Netflix have collaborated with African production companies, creating films and series that focus on the lived experiences of black people.

Animation theorist Paul Wells discusses the issues surrounding representation within animation in his book *Understanding Animation* (2016). Wells asserts that black representations as stereotypes are merely projected imaginations of the white mind. In specific relation to the character design of a black person, he affirms that the 'black caricature is ultimately the reflection of the apparent prohibitions placed upon white desire. Black stereotypes are essentially the symbolic embodiment of white hypocrisy' (Wells, 1998, p. 217). For this reason, films such as *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) highlight progression within the mainstream industry. They deconstruct the historical racial issues in animation and offer a more accurate representation and inclusion of black culture and black lives in the medium.

In recent years, the BBC has aimed to fill the gap through the animated series of *Rastamouse* (2011) and *JoJo & Gran Gran* (2020), addressing the lack of representation in a multicultural British society. One of the participants interviewed in *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) states that 'we talk representation but we don't necessarily do representation' (Anonymous, personal communication, August 3, 2022). The representation of the black British experiences and the contribution to modern British society is still underrepresented, misrepresented, or non-existent in the animation industry on a global level.

hooks argues for alternative ways to see blackness, and in the complexities of the movement of black people, there is so much history within the layers of black identity. An identity that has emerged from white privilege, an identity for survival within the anti-racist struggle. hooks states that

If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation. Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. (hooks, 2015, p. 1)

In any form of documentation, whether written, audio, or visual, the question of how black people would want their experiences to be expressed, shared, and represented is of utmost importance. In the United States, the exclusion of black lives has resulted in the introduction of black-owned production companies such as BET and award ceremonies that celebrate their contribution to the creative arts. The notion of representation and inclusion was discussed in the section on my methodology and the animated film.

According to hooks, cultural production and artistic expressiveness were also ways for displaced African people to maintain connections with the past. Artistic African cultural retentions survived long after other expressions had been lost or forgotten (hooks, 2009, p. 124). hooks' views can also be used to reflect on how hybrid forms of animated documentary can work in expressive ways. As documentary animation is an evolving branch in the field of academic animation studies, scholars have combined various methods ranging from anthropological to participatory forms that produce new and diverse perspectives. *Made in Thamesmead* actively pursues an attempt to apply a new expansive approach in animation and experimental film practices.

Conclusion

Migration continues from Africa and the Caribbean into London and other parts of the UK. The movement from the former colonial sites will also continue to contribute to the ever-evolving landscape of Britain. Animation can be understood as the art of movement. It can also be used as a living archive, documenting the past and present lived experience of the African-Caribbean communities in London. This paper has explored how animation can be used to reframe black British history, focusing on the migration and settlement of the black communities into Thamesmead, South East London, and the racial tensions resulting from this.

I combined discussions by Gilroy, hooks, and Hall alongside various animation theorists to form a critical framework to inform the documentary methodology. The interviews with members of the African-Caribbean communities living in the area revealed that there was still a strong desire to feel accepted, to have a voice, and to belong. To be denied visibility is to deepen the refusal to accept the presence of a person or a group of people.

This project aimed to explore how animation as a method can play a role in documenting the emotional states as a result of migration experienced by the African and Caribbean communities in Thamesmead. Having explored the racial tensions that resulted from waves of migration, the outcomes of the study revealed that developing a method and model for participatory animation techniques could further enhance the outcomes that support the themes of representation and identity.

Marginalisation often results in feelings of isolation, unheard, undervalued, and unseen. These are the feelings that *Made in Thamesmead* focused on highlighting, captured through the textures and tactility of working with the 16mm film.

Animation has a long history with political and social regimes, many of which negatively represented black people, and animation that is representative of the presence of black people is slowly emerging within popular media. There are still areas requiring in-depth discussion, and this will support the evolving identity of what it means to be black and British, and to no longer be governed by the socially constructed ideologies that one is born into.

Drawing parallels between the migration of black communities and the systematic erasure of their presence from popular media such as animation, it is intended that the practical outcome of the study *Made in Thamesmead* (2024) will be stored within the Thamesmead Community Archive, where the stories and experiences of the black British culture and history are still underrepresented across Britain. Even after waves of migration, the representation and inclusion of black British lives have still been misunderstood, misrepresented, and devalued. This project is one layer of many intertwined perspectives and histories connected to the migration of African and Caribbean communities in the United Kingdom that still needs to be shared.

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