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Artmaking as place-making: Black British artists' moving image Practice as reflection and reimagination

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of World War II, the UK has experienced a significant influx of migrants. By the 1980s, Black British artists had become an important creative force in many visual art fields, including artists' moving image. Through two films from Black British artists, the article analyses how they reflect the Black British experience and reimagine Black Britishness in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic contemporary British society. Meanwhile, the article also discusses how these practices deconstruct the myth of a White, Homogeneous Britain and British identity to reclaim Black British history and the integral status of Blackness in contemporary Britishness.

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Introduction

Place-making is the process of migrants forging a collective identity (Gill, 2010). It can occur spatially, in the form of areas predominantly occupied by a 'distinct ethnicity', such as 'Little India' or 'Chinatown' (Pemberton & Phillimore, 2018, p. 736). It can also happen ideologically 'in the minds of host communities' in a socio-cultural or ideological context, and 'acts to establish the validity of the needs and aspirations of a new community' (Gill, 2010, p. 1157). As Avtar Brah argues, the idea of home in diasporic communities can be considered the result of the reconciliation of the 'mythic place of desire' and the 'lived experience of the locality' (1996, pp. 188–189). Therefore, place-making is also characterising diasporic experiences (Kaur, 2016). Emotions play an important role in the place-making activities both individuals and communities.

Affect theory explores the emotional and psychological dimensions by looking into how emotions are socially and culturally constructed, influencing and reflecting collective experiences. For example, Sara Ahmed proposes the idea (2004, p. 119) of affective economies, which argues that emotions 'align individuals with communities', or align 'bodily space with social space'. Built up on the idea, she provides insights into how the circulation of emotions contributes to the construction of both the collective self and the perception of the other in the book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014). Her discussions provide crucial insights into the construction of the Black British experience and the negotiation of contemporary Black Britishness on both an individual and a collective level.

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Meanwhile, Martha Augoustinos et al. (2018) argue that the mobilisation and invocation of nationalistic emotions are important in the inclusion and exclusion practices of the dominant groups of a nation. In other words, nationalism is not just about political borders; instead, it is an emotional system that mobilises feelings like pride, nostalgia, and fear to determine who can or cannot be their members. As an important form of what Kobena Mercer describes as ‘the emerging voices, practices and identities of dispersed African, Caribbean and Asian peoples crept in from the margins of postimperial Britain’ (1994, p. 2), works of Black¹ British moving image artists have made critical attempts at both represent, spatially trace and emotionally navigate Black British memory, struggle and identity while reimagining the relationship between Black Britishness and contemporary British collective identity. They reflect the concepts of emotional mapping/emotional cartography in Giuliana Bruno’s book *Atlas of Emotion* (2018), highlighting how spaces and visual environments in cinema are imbued with emotional traces and how human experience within these spaces leads viewers to experience a ‘personal and yet social psychogeography’ (Bruno, 2018, p. 13). This psychogeographic nature enables them to address the complexities of memory and identity formation in an embodied ‘narrative voyage’ (Bruno, 2018) looking at how bodily experiences, emotions, histories and memories inhabit cinematic spaces (Bruno, 2018), making them nuanced reflections of both individual and collective place-making. Through these embodied voyages, they enable ‘new ways of seeing, and understanding’ (Mercer, 1994, p. 2) British society and Britishness. In the post-Brexit Britain driven by the fear that a multi-ethnic Britain will lose its cultural distinctiveness (Rapport, 2020), revisiting the diasporic influence in contemporary British culture and the British influence on diasporic culture in Britain at the same time would provide some insights into how the nation can keep reinventing itself to adapt to the drastic and ongoing political changes worldwide.

Based on these analyses, my article argues that the practices of Black British artist filmmakers, including those of Asian, African and Caribbean heritages, can be considered an important form of conceptual place-making due to two reasons: first, they reflect Black British identity and experience; second, they prove that Black Britishness has long been part of British collective identity. Two works of Black British artists are taken as case studies: my first case study, *The Passion of Remembrance* by Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood is a valuable exploration of the life experience of Black British communities and the representation of Blackness and Black Britishness in the 1980s. As the second case study of my research, the short film *Points of Departure* created by Alia Syed in 2014 explores the collective memories of Asian communities in Glasgow and their often-paradoxical relationship with British society. The analyses of both case studies are around three questions: (1) how place-making is reflected and achieved in the film; (2) how the Black British collective identity is constructed or questioned in the placemaking process; and (3) how these films demonstrate that Black Britishness is an integral part of contemporary British collective identity. Both the films’ narratives and their style and aesthetic choices are involved in the discussions.

Black artists in post-war Britain and British artists’ moving image since the 1980s

According to David Curtis, although there have been calls since as early as the 1920s from critics and researchers for explorations into film’s potential as a ‘purely visual language’

which conveys meanings highly effectively, terms such as ‘artists’ film’ and ‘artists’ video’ have only gained wide recognition since the early 1970s (2007, pp. 1–3). The earliest British artist filmmakers at that time were painters, sculptors and conceptual artists who occasionally made films as a supplementary element to their main creative pursuits in other fields (Curtis, 2007), while relatively few used film and video as their main medium of creative practice. Instead, film and video have mainly been used by artists in three ways, including allowing them to record the development process of works in other genres, allowing them to develop their ‘painterly or sculptural ideas’ into a ‘time-based form’ (Curtis, 2007), and prompting them to explore the time-based nature of the film genre and create time-based works.

Black British artists did not engage significantly in artists’ moving image practices when the genre started to develop in Britain. To understand their creative activities in this field, we must consider the history along with the history of diasporic artists in post-war Britain. According to Stuart Hall, there were three key waves, or generations in the post-World War II development of Black British artists. Here, Hall’s use of Black is ‘as a political umbrella term that historically forged progressive alliances, including amongst filmmakers themselves, between those of African, Asian, and Caribbean heritage in the UK’ (Malik, 2021, n.p.). Hall and many other scholars such as Kobena Mercer have all used the term in this manner. The first generation of these artists, including Horace Ové and Menelik Shabazz, were born in the 1920s and 1930s in the then-colonies of the British Empire, and came to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s (Hall, 2006). Their works adopt a realist aesthetic which presumes an ‘objective existence’ of reality and considers the main aim of representation as to ‘simply correspond to or reflect it’ (Mercer, 1994, p. 58). Although Black communities have become an integral part of the British visual art landscape since the end of World War II, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the second generation of post-war Black British artists started to get actively involved in artists’ moving image. This second generation is either descendants of migrant parents who came to London at that time or came to London early in their life, such as Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce, John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, Mona Hatoum and others, and their practices were deeply entwined with the geopolitical characteristics of the period. After that, there has been an ongoing subsequent generation since the 1990s, Black British arts progress into an even more ‘engaged position in relation to contemporary art practice’ (Hall, 2006, p. 22).

It is the second generation that has left the most significant mark in the development of artists’ moving image practices of Black British artists. They are also the focus of my article. Since the 1980s, due to the conservative policies of Margaret Thatcher’s government, socio-economic inequality in British society and British police brutality, several racially inspired uprisings and violent conflicts first started to take place, such as the 1981 and 1985 riots in Brixton and Handsworth, and the Tottenham Broadwater Farm riot in 1985. An increase in cultural and ethnic diversity, racial tension and retrospection in Britain’s history as a multi-ethnic society and a historical colonial power eventually led to what philosopher Antonio Gramsci refers to as the ‘crisis of authority’ (Gramsci, 2005, p. 210). As Gramsci argues, when the ruling class of society ‘has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading” but only “dominant”, exercising coercive force alone ... the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously’ (2005, pp. 275–276). In the British context, the traditional

cultural and ideological system most often associated with the White population historically predominant in British society used to determine issues such as who can rightfully live in the UK and even run the country, what position each of the social and ethnic groups should occupy in British society, what British culture should be like and who should have the rights to shape it. Since the 1980s, the increasingly diversified British public has gradually disconnected from them and growingly disagreed with this system²; meanwhile, a generation of Black British has also started to ponder questions related to identity and belonging (Hall, 2006, p. 17). Under this context, the practices of second-generation Black British artists, including moving image artists, have diverted into two strands. The first one is a fiercely critical and political art which played an active role in the Black struggle for liberation (Hall, 2006). Meanwhile, the second one is a 'less overtly political' art which was 'concerned with exploring the experience of, and resistance to, racism, but in a more subjective idiom' (Hall, 2006, pp. 16–17).

The diversification of Black British art is not the only result of a more and more multicultural and multi-ethnic British society. As Mercer argues, the hybridisation between cultures and identities which constitutes British Blackness would play a crucial role in the creation of 'new, hybridized identities' (1994, pp. 4–5) and create 'a new culture' that would gradually lead to a somewhat utopian 'common home' (1994, p. 4) accommodating all people in Britain regardless of their roots. The Black-British perspective, which has been rearticulated 'as an inclusive political identity based on alliances among Asian, African and Caribbean peoples, brought together in shared struggles against racism in Britain' during this period (Mercer, 1994, p. 81), played an important role in nurturing a new-born hybrid culture (Mercer, 1994, p. 5). The cinema was an important way to highlight this 'new [B]lack visibility of the eighties' in British cultural landscape (Mercer, 1994, p. 16). Since Black British artists' moving image practices combine both Black and Euro-American film cultures and have been actively engaged in the development of avant-garde film (Garfield, 2019; Mercer, 1994), they are important examples of what Mercer, borrowing Julio Garcia Espinosa's words, defines as the 'imperfect cinema', which uses improvisation to learn from practice (1994, p. 65). This learning process brought about a multicultural wave starting from the late 1980s, which was characterised by 'complexity and theoretical intervention in understandings of culture, identity, and representation' to create a 'space of critical openness, pointing to the interdependence of theory and practice' (Malik, 2021, n.p.). This space of openness brings about the opportunity to reimagine the relationship between Blackness and Britishness as forms of identities, which is one of the reasons why I consider it meaningful to use the practices of British diasporic filmmakers to articulate the place-making experiences of cultural and ethnic minorities in contemporary Britain.

Although the idea of political Blackness is at the risk of flattening the differences between different diasporic communities under this umbrella term (Jameela, 2021), I still choose to use it for two reasons. First, as introduced previously, it signifies the progressive political alliance between the Asian, African and Caribbean communities in Britain. Besides, it is also my contention that the practices of Black British artists would allow for more nuanced representations of the relevant communities. As a result of this unique historical background, the works of the second generation can be either considered as one whole moment or two separate moments. First, there was the 'polemical and politicized art' with messages 'often appearing too pressing, too immediate, too

literal' and fuelled by 'a full-blown anti-racist politics' (Hall, 2006, pp. 16–17); then, there was 'a second set of impulses, less overtly political, though no less "engaged" with wider issues: concerned with exploring the experience of, and resistance to, racism, but in a more subjective idiom' (Hall, 2006, p. 17).

Place-making in artmaking and artmaking as place-making: how Black British artist filmmakers reflect and rethink Black Britishness

As mentioned before, this article provides insights into Black British identity and experience and the relationship between Black Britishness and British collective identity in Black British Artists' moving image practices. It focuses on the works of the second generation of post-war Black British artists, who started their careers at the beginning of the 1980s, many of whom are still making art today. Of the two different branches of the second wave, I have chosen both my case studies from the one which is 'less overtly political' (Hall, 2006, pp. 16–17). This is first because these works better represent Mercer's comments on Black diasporic art and culture's function to reveal the 'truths' about their experience and liberate the multicultural contemporary British society from stereotypical thinking, thus 'open[ing] up new ways of seeing, and understanding' (1994, p. 2) for both the Black British experience and the realities of British society.

Another reason why I look at this branch of practices from second-generation Black British artists is their formal features. The appropriation and creolisation of the avant-garde film theories and practice as a Euro-American cultural form in the articulation of Black British experiences can be considered as what Hall describes as the process of the 'unsettling, recombination, hybridization and "cut-and-mix"' (1988, p. 30) of the British culture and the cultures of Africa, the Caribbeans, Asia and beyond. At the centre of this process is firstly a sense of recognition that Black British experience is fundamentally a diasporic experience, which enables filmmakers to think about what it means to be Black in British society, or the relationship between Blackness and Britishness, instead of simply reproducing their creative roots (Hall, 1988). Meanwhile, it also embodies a 'new cultural politics' that encourages the articulation of cultural identities of different Black British communities instead of suppressing them, which provides an alternative to the 'embattled, hegemonic conception of "Englishness"' (Hall, 1988, p. 30).

The Passion of Remembrance (1986)

The Passion of Remembrance (Figure 1) is the third film of Sankofa Film and Video Collective, a group of Black-British filmmakers and artists including Isaac Julien, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Martina Attille and Robert Crusz. As introduced by Martina Attille, the film is another investigation of the 'salient forces' or the 'systems of control' that rule 'the way ... young [B]lack people chose to express our lives and concerns' (1986, p. 100), following the documentary *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983) about the death of a young Black man in a North London police station, and the experimental documentary *Territories* (1984) about the conflicts between the overwhelmingly White British authorities and the young Black festivalgoers. These earlier films focus on the often-difficult relationship between the police and the Black communities in Britain, whereas *Territories* addresses 'the way [B]lack cultures are being contained', while reappraising



Figure 1. Self-questioning ... the passion of remembrance. Photograph: Courtesy BFI, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/25/the-passion-of-remembrance-review-absorbing-fusion-of-black-radicalism-and-feminism>.

and reinscribing 'the [B]lack subject with a different set of values' (Attille, 1986, p. 100), as a result that the visual representation of Black people is often confined to problematic stereotypes. This became the starting point for *The Passion of Remembrance*, thus making it a reconstruction of the '[B]lack political history' (Pines, 1986, p. 93). As Jim Pines describes poetically, the title of this film indicates that the emotion Black communities have towards British society is 'a mixture of respect, exhilaration and angst' (1986, p. 93) on a collective level. When taking into consideration that passion also refers to the arrest, trial and torture before the crucifixion of Jesus, the title elevates the struggles of Black British communities to a religious level. Based on Ahmed's discussions (2014, p. 32) of pain, this title also highlights how the wounds and traumas related to these struggles define Black Britishness.

Due to the influence of Euro-American avant-garde cinema, there has also been an anxiety to define 'a practice that upsets and disrupts fixed expectations and normative assumptions about what [B]lack films should look like' (Mercer, 1994, p. 54) and a worry about being seen as a 'form of cultural mimicry' in the time the film was produced. However, while Black British artists' 'mimetic mode of cinematic expression' can be understood as a result of neocolonialism, it is also an appropriation and creolisation of elements from the dominant culture, as well as the disarticulation of given signs and rearticulation of their symbolic meaning (Mercer, 1994, p. 63). *The Passion of Remembrance* is one of the most notable examples of this creolisation process. Instead of the linear narrative structure mainstream to the practices of earlier Black British artists, this film uses two storylines that take place in different realms to investigate how Black British place-making takes place in what Attille defines as 'public spaces and private spaces' (Pines, 1986, p. 94):

the public spaces are dominated by the 'official history' and 'the self-appointed spokes-people', while the private space refers to where 'people actually live and experience the way things are' (Pines, 1986, p. 94). From an affective economies perspective (Ahmed, 2004), the film reveals how emotional investments in identity, belonging, and resistance circulate within the Black community, reinforcing collective resilience against systemic racism through these scenes, as well as providing valuable insights into the complexities of Black identity formation and community building in a divided British society. Based on the discussions of Bruno (2018), the respective locations for these storylines are sites where personal and collective emotions are navigated and used to map out a nuanced image of both the emotional and ideological terrain of Black Britishness and the everyday Black British experience at the same time. Meanwhile, the characters' emotional journeys in both storylines, which range from frustration and anger to hope and solidarity, also provide a nuanced exploration of Black British place-making and reflect what Bruno (2018, p. 13) defines as the psychogeographic nature of cinematic spaces.

In the first storyline of the film, two unnamed speakers, one female and one male, start by talking separately about the struggles of Black British life from their personal perspectives: she highlights the missing female voice in the whole discourse of Black activism and the sexist expectations historically imposed onto Black females; while he alludes passionately to how his image, or his skin colour, has subjected him to social and police scrutiny since a very young age. These two speakers then meet in a highly stylised desert landscape, continuing their heated discussion. Using this desert landscape which is 'out of time and place' to create a 'moment of estrangement' from everyday life, this storyline provides a 'meta-conversation' (Garfield, 2019, p. 105) about the resilience of the Black British communities in the face of systematic injustice and historical prejudice, as well as the complexity of the Black British experience and lived reality beyond cultural and ethnic stereotypes. In a highly stylised manner as such, this storyline embodies how contestation for the public space and the right to construct Black British history and guide the future of Black British communities is not just taking place at the time the film was produced, but also at every point in contemporary Black British history. This abstract, symbolic debate in the first storyline is interwoven with a second storyline of more grounded, narrative-driven portrayal of Black British experiences throughout the film, which highlights how the broader ideological struggles over Black British identity manifest in the everyday lived experiences of individuals/families and communities. Built upon and being shaped by the discussions of the speakers in the first storyline, the second storyline is an investigation of how different identities and political consciousnesses within the Black British community may shape the specific lived experiences of each of its members. As Hall comments in response to writer Salman Rushdie, the Black British experience is a highly complex and diverse concept which should not be simplified (Rushdie, 1988). Hall also points out that the representation of lived experience and the convey of political messages are also not contradictory (Rushdie, 1988), and the second storyline of this film exemplifies his point. Here, a more narrative approach is applied to present the everyday experience of the Baptiste family in London, such as the family watching TV and chatting, or the daughter, Maggie, going clubbing and discussing politics with friends. These small but non-trivial reflections of their life embody the Black communities' contradictory relationship with British society, which explains the British public's

negative emotions towards immigrants (Augoustinos et al., 2018). Together, these narratives spark a mixture of feelings such as anger, frustration, uneasiness and solidarity in viewers. They highlight the complexity of Black British experiences, redefine Black Britishness as a plural, contested and layered notion, and point out how Black British place-making is a process of fighting both against a repressive system of 'modern conservative racism and nationalism' (Gilroy, 2002, p. 53) and within the community. Meanwhile, through showing a sense of defiance across all the characters appear in the film, the film also shows that Black Britishness will not simply scatter in a more intersectional context; instead, this collective defiance will be the foundation of a new, more inclusive solidarity both within the Black British communities and among British of different skin colours.

The use of archives and the design of the soundtrack are two other important elements which help the film spatialise and reimagine the Black British experience and identity. Archive footage of various protests, often accompanied by music scores from genres that were popular in the era such as synth-pop, funk and R&B, is used to ground both storylines, and most importantly, the endeavours of place-making and reinventing the notion of Black Britishness embodied in these storylines into the particular Black diasporic space and time in the 1980s in Britain. The viewers are also introduced to an in-depth image of how the collective place-making activities of Black communities have proved the validity of their needs and aspirations as an integral part of British society and transformed it in profound ways. Just like what Maggie's friend Lou says on seeing footage from the 1984 to 1985 Miners' Strike, '... You can hear them thinking, "This is not my England, not the England my grandfather's father fought for". They must be wondering which side the law's on'. Maggie then responds by saying, 'I bet they can't believe that they're being treated just like ... Blacks? ... they know how it feels to be on the receiving end'. This conversation proves how the tenacious fight for recognition in the British community and against racism and nationalism from the Black diasporic communities have opened up new ways of seeing, comprehending and responding to the British public beyond racial subjects. It highlights the 'vulnerability of the [W]hite nation' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 2) through the increasingly prominent presence of Black bodies that are traditionally considered 'out of place' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8), and demonstrates again how Gramsci's 'crisis of authority' (2005, p. 210) played out in the 1980s Britain. In other words, through the interplay of archive and sound, the film reimagines Black British history as a dynamic, lived, and felt experience instead of simply recovering it from the margins of British society. It constructs a conceptual and affective space where Black Britishness are not only represented, but also being redefined in relation to the broader landscape of Britishness and actively redefining this landscape at the same time.

By actively interrogating Black British place-making from two different angles instead of simply representing it within existing frameworks or replicating the representation of earlier artists, *The Passion of Remembrance* is able to provide critical reflections on the representation of Black Britishness and reimagine the relationship between Black Britishness and Britishness. For a long time, Black British cinema has frequently portrayed Black communities as a marginalised and unassimilable Other (Mercer, 1988), which is an important reason why Blackness and Britishness have often been considered as two contradicting notions. This film challenges the tradition by portraying all characters as active, functioning members of British society capable of critical thinking, self-articulation and

rational communication. Ideologically speaking, first-generation Black British cinema also considers the two terms Black and British to be 'mutually exclusive' and that there also exist 'contradictions inherent in the very idea of a [B]lack British identity' (Mercer, 1988, p. 10), which is also challenged in the film through its investigations of the relationship Black British history and the contemporary Black identity and experience. It marks a beginning for Black British artists to start thinking about 'how to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity' which is different from the hegemonic perception of Britishness, an unmarked, normative standard against which the identities of other cultural and ethnic groups are defined (Hall, 1988). Based on Beaman's discussions (2016), the marginalisation and alienation of the Black British communities and other diasporic communities is fundamentally the denial of citizenship to them based on their differences in a cultural sense. This film recognises 'the right to be different ... with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's rights to belong' (Rosaldo, 1994, p. 57), which practically reimagines the scope of contemporary Britishness. This act of reimagining Britishness through the lens of Black British experience serves as a form of place-making, which highlights the status of Black Britishness as integral to the contemporary British social life and identity rather than existing at the margins of these realms.

As a departure from the 'slice-of-life' narrative and 'language of realism' of films like *Pressure*, *The Passion of Remembrance* investigates the complexities of Black British experiences and identities 'through an intersectional understanding of the processes of racism, and of the varied construction of the [B]lack community' (Garfield, 2019, p. 102). According to Mercer, a 'heterosexist version of [B]lack militancy' led by Elderidge Cleaver and many others often propose an 'authorised sexism' (1994, p. 139) by denying Black women of their agency and legitimising homophobia in Black communities. In the UK, this heterosexist Black militancy was also the reason the voice of Black females and queer people was absent from race-related debates and discussions even in the 1970s (Mercer, 1994, p. 139). This film introduces these historically sidelined perspectives to question the simplified representations of Black Britishness, which are frequently limited by the discourse of the Other or overly fixated on Black masculinity. Firstly, the lack of strong female figures is addressed in the film through the performance of the actress of the female speaker in the first storyline, Anni Domingo, who showed a strong sense of individuality and the courage to speak up for herself (Atille, 1986). In the second storyline, the situation of Black British female is addressed from another angle, when Maggie gets constantly talked down by the older male members of her family, while contributions from Black females to the Black liberation movements in the second half of the twentieth century are also frequently dismissed by these males (Pillai, 2023). Similarly, both earlier and more recent investigations have confirmed that the authorised sexism has led to the negative perceptions Black communities, including Black Americans, have towards the sexual minority communities (Lewis, 2023; Mercer, 1994). In the second storyline, the experience of Maggie and her friend, Black gay man Gary shows how sexism and homophobia are often intertwined in the Black British experience. For example, when showing footage from multiple protests to her friends, one of the Black young men asks Maggie whether she is a lesbian and states that she is 'confused' because she 'check(s) for [W]hite people things too much'. As the confrontation develops, Michael claims that his heart is clean, while an angry Gary denies that he has

any romantic feelings for him and points out his ignorant homophobia, saying, ‘boys will be boys, who in turn grow up and learn to oppress others’. By exposing the internal tensions of Black British communities and the agency of their members, the film not only questions the validity of various established representations of Black Britishness. Apart from that, it also disrupts and complexifies the binary framework that has been traditionally defining Britishness in a monolithic manner by adopting a non-static and non-homogenous perspective which incorporates the multifacetedness of Black British experience and identity to reimagine what it means to be a multicultural and multi-ethnic Britain.

Points of Departure (2014)

Points of Departure (Figure 2) is an example of how, as Divya Tolia-Kelly (2004) argues, art-making is integral to the making of heritage and cultural memory because it can embody and communicate the complex layers of cultural identity and historical consciousness. The film’s title ‘points of departure’ refers to the precise location established by seafaring vessels to set a course, and also the starting point for discussions, arguments or courses of action. Syed says poetically in an article that diaspora narratives frequently suggest that the diasporic people ‘have to start again – and in starting again a new beginning is conceived, an event is cited, built upon and passed down’ (2008, p. 71). Based on this statement, we can say both meanings of the phrase are reflected in the film: Glasgow is not only a cityscape that is the most intimate to Syed, but also the prologue to her



Figure 2. Points of departure (2014) by Alia Syed, video still, LUX, <https://lux.org.uk/work/points-of-departure/>.

subsequent adult life and her journey into the art world. Syed got the inspiration for the film on a trip back to Glasgow to help her elderly father move house. On the trip, she discovered an old tablecloth to which she felt emotionally attached, leading her to 'create the tapestry that is *Points of Departure*' (LUX, n.d.). To reconstruct the Glasgow which is of such intimate historical and personal meanings to her, Syed decided that it would be better for her to 'find an image within the BBC archive that relates to her memories of growing up in Glasgow' (Artefact, 2019, n.p.), and combine them with the footage of contemporary Glasgow she filmed travelling around the city. It is also an investigation of the dialectics between the 'public spaces' and the 'private spaces' (Pines, 1986, p. 94), two concepts that have been introduced in the previous section. Like many other second-generation Black-British artists, her works exemplify the 'cut-and-mix' (1986, p. 30) philosophy Hall describes and adopt 'self-consciously cinematic strategies at work in new forms of [B]lack filmmaking' (Mercer, 1994, p. 53).

A Former member of the London Film-Makers' Co-op, Syed uses structural filmmaking approaches extensively in her practices. According to Peter Gidal, structuralist/materialist film is 'the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/recorrect it, to clarify and analyse the production-process of the specific image at any specific moment' which 'produces certain relations between segments, between what the camera is aimed at and the way that "image" is presented' (1978, p. 1). At the early stage of her career, Syed thought of structural filmmaking as a 'very [W]hite male idea' (Danino et al., 2015, p. 176). Similarly, Sarah Pucill points out that since the female image is 'closely related to the body' due to a position of difference, radical feminism will contribute to structural filmmaking will be in the way of conflict (Danino et al., 2015, p. 169), namely the disruption of the habitual order and conventions in structural filmmaking. This leads to what Nina Danino et al. describe as a 'feminine space' which allows subjects to speak 'from this position of not-the-centre' (2015, p. 175), which is also reflected in Syed's works. Syed uses structural filmmaking as 'an approach to representation that was against representation' which allows her to 'represent something within [her]self ... in a material way' (Danino et al., 2015, p. 169). Starting from her unique subjectivity as a mixed-heritage woman growing up in an age when Britain was still in 'a climate of relative hostility and isolation' (Garfield, 2019, p. 108), she uses a 'quiet, intimate and poetic' (Garfield, 2019, p. 107) approach to fusing the visual footage of her personal reality as a diaspora member in Britain and narratives on culture, history, memory, identity and rituals to destabilise the singularity of perspective in structural filmmaking and question the stereotype of what Black British films should look like.

Born in 1964 in Swansea to a British mother and a first-generation Pakistani immigrant father, Alia Syed came from a background that combines two strikingly different cultures and ethnicities from two parts of the world that are far away from each other but historically intertwined because of the colonial history of the British Empire. Since the 1980s, Syed's works have been constantly reflecting Mercer's discussions on how Black British filmmakers' practices can be effectively used to rearticulate the European and American avant-garde film culture under an alternative context, which is also the case for *Points of Departure*. Fundamentally speaking, *Points of Departure* is born from Syed's place-making journey in the UK as a Black British descendant, which is also typical of generations of other Black British people growing up in the last few decades of the twentieth century. As Syed admits, despite being born and raised a British citizen, she started to feel that her opinions were often at odds with her White British friends, and she was at times an

outsider as she grew up. This alienated feeling soon developed into a sense of self-consciousness that she is not the same as the majority of people around her, both externally and internally. And this emotional journey did not start from nowhere. As Gilroy points out, British society has historically held a hostile attitude towards its Asian immigrants: conservative politicians such as Enoch Powell have long held the opinion that British Asians are 'bound by cultural and biological ties which merit the status of a fully formed, alternative national identity', making them 'pose a threat to the British way of life by virtue of their strength and cohesion' (2002, p. 45). As a result of these invocations of British public's negative emotions, a structural exclusion of British Asians is largely tolerated in the 1970s when Syed was a child (Augoustinos et al., 2018). As introduced earlier, Syed started making this film by looking into BBC's archive in search of footage related to the history and memory of Black communities in Glasgow. Although Glasgow's culture and history are the result of the hybridisation of a diverse range of ethnic and cultural communities, Syed 'could not find a human presence she could relate to' (Artefact, 2019, n.p.), and eventually chose to not include any major human presences in all but one shot of historical Glasgow in both the archive footage about the city and the images of contemporary Glasgow's urban space she filmed herself. This can also be considered a 'socially acceptable' collective expression of an essentialist and nationalist notion of 'how it is stereotypically, formulaically, to be "British"' (Rapport, 2020, p. 94), which the film intends to deconstruct from the very beginning.

Made in a highly spatial style closely associated with structural filmmaking, *Points of Departure* reflects on the place-making of Syed, her family and Black Asians in Glasgow and the UK to reimagine the status of Asians and other Black British communities in British society and reconstruct the relationship between Black Britishness and Britishness. The film is made up of images about various places and non-human subjects recorded by BBC archive videos and fresh footage shot by Syed, such as a large flock of birds flying in the sky, newspapers being printed, sheets of fabric being woven, roads, rails and railway bridges, piles of coal being shovelled, brick walls and buildings, and the general Glasgow cityscape. By weaving the past and present of Glasgow together from Syed's perspective as a member of the Asian diaspora, the film suggests that Black British have long been integral to British urbanisation. Imbued with the weight of the collective histories of these communities, this affective geography of Glasgow's diasporic cityscape provides viewers with the spaces to witness physical traces of the unique existence and place-making experiences of Syed, her family and Glaswegians of all skin colours. The absence of human presence in the film also does not leave the film empty. Instead, imbuing the footage of these spaces with personal and collective memories turns them into what Bruno terms an 'archive of emotion pictures' (2018, p. 264) by evoking in viewers a mixture of disorientation, nostalgia and self-reflectivity. By leading viewers onto a journey comparable to emotional place-making, it turns these locations into affective spaces which manifest Black Britishness and questions the invisibility of Black British subjects in official narratives of Britishness. At the end of the film, Syed uses the only footage with a non-white child as the final shot of the whole film. This single human existence reinserts the presence of herself and the Black diasporic population like her into the city's urban space. This living example of Black Britishness serves as a symbol of the collective history and lived experience of Black British, including Asians, questioning the invisibility of Black British subjects in dominant cultural narratives and

indicating that they will keep thriving in British society. Different from the loud claim made by *The Passion of Remembrance*, this film uses a subtle, quiet and deeply personal approach to bring a diasporic perspective into the collective imagery of contemporary Britain, thus highlighting the undeniable existence of Black British communities in British society which should be seen, remembered and archived.

As one of the most significant features of structural filmmaking, the interplay between visual footage and voiceover texts in *Points of Departure* plays a crucial role by navigating the city, mapping her own identity onto its spaces while reflecting on the place-making experiences of her family through both her own narration which describes the tablecloth and her father's effort to translating the Urdu Ghazal. The voiceover here starts with Syed talking about the tablecloth that inspired this film and some relevant memories. Tolia-Kelly (2004) argues that domestic possessions have an important role in positioning diasporic identities and narrating family histories for British South Asian communities. Therefore, Syed's past experiences are the precipitates of another socio-political landscape refracted through the tablecloth in this film, and the tablecloth can be considered a material artefact of how Black British experiences are entangled with the development of modern British life. This tablecloth from a bygone era embodies Syed's unusual upbringing as a mixed child in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as an embodiment of the complexities within her family history and a talisman of the trans-generational home-making efforts in her family. Besides, it is also a silent witness of all other British Asians who have lived, and are still living in Glasgow and Britain, despite the disappearance of their place and their place-making effort within the narrative of the BBC, the representation of Britain's official socio-cultural and political discourses. Through the use of an artefact as such, her film not only preserves but also actively constructs the place of the Asian community in Glasgow, or Black British communities in the UK as tightly knitted together with the rest of the British society, which reinstates the point that is embodied in the single footage of the dark-skinned child in the film, as introduced above.

Starting from there, viewers gradually hear another important component of the voiceover, which is her father translating an Urdu Ghazal she discovered in the archive, a kind of poetry and folk song that expresses 'the beauty of love and the pain of loss', which 'exposes a process of translation that becomes the key' (Artefact, 2019, n.p.), and which grants a door into the labyrinth of both her recollected memory of everyday life rituals from the past and the memories of her family's home-making experience in the previous years that had been attached to and imbued in them, as well as the BBC archive. Viewers can hear her father struggling to translate the Ghazal. Drawing on Ahmed's discussions (2000, 2014), this interpretation process can be considered as a reflection of the ongoing place-making process of negotiating and reconstructing identity in the face of displacement and an embodiment of the relevant emotional turmoil Syed's parents, Syed herself and generations of British Asians have experienced or are experiencing in their place-making journeys, often while being ignored or neglected due to their failure to reproduce a national ideal or being the embodiment of the threat to Britain as a White nation. This roots the discussions about the personal and collective history and memory of the Black diasporic communities in Glasgow and Britain in the everyday of contemporary Britain, thus highlighting that Black Britishness is an integral part of Britishness. This then works as a metaphor that there can be 'no simple "return" or "recovery" of the past which is 'not in-experienced through the categories of the present' (Hall, 1988,

p. 30): the home-making activities of Black British communities are unavoidably transferring the socio-cultural and physical landscape of Britain, while the British socio-cultural systems are also constantly reshaping the existence of migrants and diaspora members living here. Or rather, there is 'no base for creative enunciation in a simple production of traditional forms which are not transformed by ... the identities of the present' (Hall, 1988). In short, this translation process is a metaphor for the diasporic population's effort to negotiate their existence in the face of marginalisation both culturally and ethnically. As Sara Ahmed might argue, it represents the emotional labour of place-making under conditions of being structurally ignored or even seen as a threat to national purity.

Like in her other films such as *Fatima's Letter* (1992), the voices of both Syed and her father in the voiceover of *Points of Departure* are 'caught between the present and the past' and 'in stasis between where you are from and where you are going to' (Garfield, 2019, p. 108), and effectively contribute to overturning 'structures that determine what is regarded as culturally central and what is regarded as culturally marginal' (Julien & Mercer, 1988, p. 2). This, on top of the personal and linguistic fragmentations across her descriptions of the tablecloth in English and her father's translation of the *Gazal* using Urdu, challenges viewers to personally experience in-betweenness, resist binary systems that have been shaping their perception of what is Blackness and Britishness, and rethink how the relationship between Blackness and Britishness viewed. By highlighting the existence of the Black British communities and reinserting their existence into the materialities of the British cityscapes, they rupture the 'sense of mutual exclusivity' (Mercer, 1994, p. 66) between Blackness and Britishness and question the 'monologic exclusivity on which dominant versions of national identity and collective belonging are based' (Mercer, 1994, p. 66), thus visualising and spatialising Black Britishness and reimagining contemporary Britishness from a diasporic perspective.

Conclusion

My research timescale of the 1980s and onwards is a particular point when multiculturalism emerged and first took central stage in the country, and it 'could be seen as the last gasp of a model of modernity predicated on the tenet of universalism, where equality was expected' (Garfield, 2019, p. 98). However, Black British films since this era are not only a reflection of the drastic socio-political changes British society has been experiencing in the aftermath of the Thatcher era, but also a response to the 'continued social and political disenfranchisement of communities directly affected by such political shifts' (Bradley, 2019, p. 73). Instead of being restricted by the realist traditions, both of my case studies highlight the 'complexity rather than homogeneity' (Mercer, 1994, p. 53) and articulate 'new, hybridized identities' and 'new culture' (Mercer, 1994, pp. 4–5) of contemporary Britain. They map Black British place-making not through a linear narrative of belonging, but through emotionally resonant journeys that weave personal memory into broader socio-political histories. Instead of shouldering the burden of proving their Britishness, both films 'turn dominant versions of Englishness inside out' (Mercer, 1994, p. 66) by 'talking about [their] experience in the diaspora', their personal or collective experiences as part of the Black British communities, and the 'specificity of the Black experience' (Fusco, 1988, p. 31) compared with the experiences of Black diasporas in other countries, such as in European nations or the United States.

Both films respond in distinct yet interconnected ways to the three guiding questions posted at the beginning of this paper. *The Passion of Remembrance* uses two strikingly different land/cityscapes and a non-linear narrative structure to achieve the reimagination of the Black British experience and identity. The film interrogates the marginalised, fixed and simplistic representation of Black Britishness, and instead investigates the Black Britishness in relation to many different issues such as gender, sexuality and generational gap. By doing so, it deconstructs the repressive binary framework that Blackness and Britishness are mutually exclusive, thus arguing that Blackness is an important part of contemporary Britishness. Meanwhile, *Points of Departure* uses a non-linear and spatial approach typical of structural filmmaking to reimagine the place-making history and memory of Asian communities in Glasgow. a creative method mostly associated with White male filmmakers, can also be adapted into Black British filmmaking practices. Juxtaposing her intimate personal memories of Glasgow and BBC's archive, the film questions the invisibility of Black Britishness in the city's official history written by a nation-state-approved guardian by reinserting the Black British existence into both Glasgow's history and present, thus asserting that Black Britishness is not marginal but fundamental to the British collective identity. Considering this nationalist mentality behind the missing of Glasgow Asians from BBC's archive was also behind the socio-political turbulences in Britain in the last three decades, such as Brexit (Rapport, 2020), it is especially meaningful to revisit this film and reimagine the place of Black British communities, as well as other diasporic communities in the public narrative of British society, culture and history.

As Gilroy points out, British nationalists often associate the so-called 'national decline' with 'the dilution of once homogeneous and continuous national stock by alien strains' and argue for 'banishing [B]lacks, repatriating them' (2002, pp. 45–46). Since Brexit, Britishness has been increasingly contested and debated both in the socio-political and the cultural context (Gronlund, 2019), while nationalist and xenophobic ideologies continue to provide 'a constant point of reference and orientation' (Gilroy, 2012, p. 395). Revisiting these legacies of the 'lived multicultural produced in the aftermath of the anti-racism of the 1970s and 1980s' (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1816) offers a new vocabulary of representation centred on ethnic diversity, which would help to lessen the impact of society's obsession with the essentialist imagery of nationhood and guide the contestations of emotions and nationhood in contemporary Britain.

Notes

1. I am aware that scholars like Stuart Hall have used the lowercase black in their writings. But as John Daniszewski, vice-president of the Associated Press points out, the use of uppercase Black conveys 'an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black', which reflects Hall's intention. Meanwhile, Daniszewski also argues that the 'lowercase black is a color, not a person', while the uppercase Black is more respectful. See below: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jun/20/associated-press-style-guide-capitalize-black>. Therefore, I chose to use uppercase Black in the whole article. For consistency reasons, I also used uppercase White in the whole article. But different from its use in recent activist movements such as Black Lives Matter, the 'Black' used in this article is a political umbrella term rather than a racial one that refers to British artists of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage who politically identify with the Black identity.
2. Although Gramsci is not British and from a much earlier era, his writings are still relevant in more recent British academics' discussions, such as Kobena Mercer's analysis of the cultural

politics of the UK during the 1980s and the 1990s as a result of this unique socio-political environment of British society.

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