

What it means to be Black Girl Essex

The artist and Essex Girl Liberation Front member's new exhibition explores black people's experiences of living in the county, writes **Hettie Judah**



Elsa James filmed the video 'A Jab Jab Awakening Towards a New Essex' in Dedham Vale earlier this year. **ANDY DELANEY**

Podcasts A Positive Life



In this moving BBC Sounds series, pop star Sam Smith charts stories of HIV in the UK over the past 40 years. It begins with Terrence Higgins, who in July 1982 became one of the first people to die of an AIDS-related illness in Britain. We know his name because of the circumstances of his death, but what about him as a person? Smith explores Higgins' life as a young gay man in west Wales, speaking to those who knew him and who praise "his unique way of dancing" and the way he "cared about other people". Along with hearing from people who remember the earliest years of the crisis, Smith also meets activists who fought for effective treatment and those living with HIV today.

Gwendolyn Smith

At the end of 2020, a group of women calling themselves the Essex Girl Liberation Front made headlines when they had a pejorative definition of "Essex Girl" removed from a dictionary used for foreign language students. For two years, the collective had pushed back against well-worn stereotypes that had made the women of their county the butt of jokes since the late 1980s. Intelligent and articulate, they spoke at public events dressed in T-shirts declaring "This is What an Essex Girl Looks Like".

Among their number was the artist Elsa James. Born in London, James moved to Chafford Hundred with her young family in 1999, then 10 years later decamped to Southend-on-Sea. It was still Essex, but "there was a contrast between being in Chafford Hundred with a big black community, and then being in very white Southend", James remembers. Moving further east, she realised: "We are in the Essex people talk about, where the stereotype exists."

During the Essex Girl Liberation Front years, James collaborated with historians to explore the county's forgotten black history, making works inspired by two figures with links to the county. One, Hester Woodley, an enslaved woman brought to England from the Caribbean, was buried in Harlow.

The other, a West African beauty queen called Princess Dinubolu,

caused a national sensation when she participated in a pageant in Southend in 1908. Reading newspaper reports from the time, James was struck by Dinubolu's rebellious wit: asked what her beauty secret was she said: "Oh, you know, what we belles do is bury ourselves up to the neck in sand, and that makes our black skin velvety."

Despite James's campaigning, and the work she was doing honouring black figures in the county's history, she realised she was holding back from owning her own identity as an Essex Girl. After two decades in Essex, when friends from London asked where she was living, she

would still repeat apologetic lines about moving to Southend for the schools. She may have been wearing a "This is What an Essex Girl Looks Like" T-shirt, but she didn't feel like an Essex girl.

She says: "I had this moment where I thought: 'This is ridiculous. I've just honoured these two black women who have passed through Essex. I need to change my relationship with Essex right now'."

Inspired by the social media hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, James coined the term "Black Girl Essex". She started to ask others what the "Essex Girl" label meant to black women. The most shocking

response came closest to home. James's adult daughter admitted to having a profound identity crisis. Some years earlier a cousin had said of his white girlfriend: "She's blacker than you, because you're in Essex, and she's in London."

James was horrified, firstly because her daughter had not thought to tell her before, but also because of the implications. "I started thinking - is being in this area diluting your black identity? And what does that mean?" These are questions that James has since posed again and again: to students, locals and community groups.

The result of that research has fil-



The video 'An Afrofuture Narrative for Essex' was filmed beneath the M25 at Thurrock; James's 'The Black Essex Flag' (right) replicates the official county flag of Essex, which dates back to the 17th century. **ANDY DELANEY, ANNA LUKALA**



tered into James's new exhibition at Focal Point gallery in Southend, *Othered in a region that has been historically Othered*, which includes films, sound works, prints and neons. Fragments of interviews that James conducted over the past seven years appear in film soundtracks, and in a series of black-on-black prints.

The title work is a fantastical three-part film in which James performs to camera as figures representing the past, present and future of Black Girl Essex. In the first, James assumes a role from an earlier generation of vilified women: one of those persecuted in the Essex witch trials at the turn of the 17th century. In the third, filmed beneath the M25 in Thurrock, she is a gold-clad harbinger of the future.

The central linking film finds the artist in a lush, green field beside a slow-flowing river - Constable country - the acme of English pastoralism. Here, against a soundtrack of drumming, she dips her hands into a bucket of blue-black paint, which she smears across her skin, to perform Jab Jab - the devil dancer from Grenadian carnival tradition. It may look incongruous, but there is, of course, a link between the woman, the dance and the idyllic landscape: all are components in the history of wealth made from enslaved labour.

Carnival is a formative part of James's heritage: in West London, her dad was a co-founder of a big steel band. "He grew up in a small island that's part of the Grenada three island state," says James.

I started thinking - is being in this area diluting your black identity?

"The French brought carnival to the Caribbean with them, but the enslaved people weren't allowed to participate: you couldn't dance, you couldn't play music, unless it was approved. My name is James, because I am named after whoever was in charge of my ancestors."

Jab Jab derives from the French word for devil - *diable* became "jab". The horned, painted character is subversive, mimicking the oppressive behaviour of the slave masters.

"It's a ritual, performative way of moving your body," James says of the dance. "It's about making yourself black, shiny and greasy. The key about Jab Jab is that it's liberating."

And so James performs Jab Jab in Essex as a liberation ritual, opening the way for change. A reminder, for those who need it, of what kind of change James is looking for comes from the black-on-black prints: gloss on matt, read by the reflected light. These are first-hand accounts of racism experienced by black men working in the county.

The gallery is soundtracked by low-level fragments of 1970s and 80s comedy routines, including Jim Davidson performing as his character Chalky White. The racist jokes and stereotypes also provided the back-

ground noise to James's childhood. "My memory of Southend from the 1980s is about the National Front," she recalls, adding that black people learned quickly which pubs on the seafront were dangerous.

The concluding film in James's trilogy opens with a quote from the writer and curator Ekow Eshun: "Afro-futurism takes that 'othering' and turns it into a zone of possibility and new dreaming."

As we watch James dancing in a haze of gold, spoken word poetry plays, imagining a future for the county that embraces the full diversity of its population. She asks: "What would Essex look like if it didn't have a boundary or border? And it wasn't so close to London? And sitting on Pier Hill felt the same as jamming in Notting Hill. And it was a thing to eat jerk-cockles while drinking white rum by the sea."

While you may not see it on *Towie*, multicultural Essex is already here: James tells me that 38 mother tongues were spoken at her younger daughter's primary school in Southend.

The stereotype of the bottle blonde with a bottle tan is outdated, and no wonder: Essex Girl and Essex Man are a legacy of the Thatcher years. James is here to help us imagine a new, celebratory identity to replace them.

'Elsa James: Othered in a region that has been historically Othered' is at the Focal Point Gallery in Southend, Essex, until 18 September

The weekend's television

RACHAEL SIGEE



'Freedom' balances the partying and protest in its celebration of Pride

» **Freedom: 50 Years of Pride** Channel 4, Saturday, 8pm ★★★★★

It seems likely that a documentary charting the history of Pride in the UK might face the same issues as the event itself: how to balance the personal with the political and the party with the protest.

So it is to the enormous credit of those behind Channel 4's **Freedom: 50 Years of Pride** - the Oscar-nominated director Stephen Daldry and playwright Joe Robertson - that the film felt simultaneously celebratory, educational and urgent. Coherent storytelling, a broad range of interviewees and a willingness to confront recent problems struck just the right balance to honour five decades of queer activism.

Blending a traditional documentary style with a recorded evening of performance from the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, the iconic LGBT+ venue in south-west London, **Freedom** traced the evolution of UK Pride from its Stonewall-inspired beginnings in 1972 through the riots of the 1980s, the "mega-Prides" of the 1990s and the corporate sponsorship of the 2000s.

Featuring interviews with some of the earliest Pride organisers, including Peter Tatchell and Ted Brown, the film depicted how the first marches took place in a post-decriminalisation climate of stigmatisation, violence and media vilification, before progressing towards becoming more of an organised arts festival.

Time was given over to discussing the emergence of the Lesbian Strength March, in response to a feeling that Pride was dominated by gay men's issues, before the community banded together in the face of the AIDS crisis, Margaret Thatcher and Section 28.

Freedom didn't shy away from issues that have dogged Pride in recent years, such as commercialisation and

internal divisions. There was a reverence for older activists and the risks they took to fight for rights that are now enjoyed by younger generations, but also an acknowledgement that the nature of the fight is constantly changing.

"There will always be splits," said one activist, Lisa Power. "The question is, when the crunch comes, can you stick together?"

Lady Phyll, a co-founder of UK Black Pride, spoke passionately about the need for safe spaces for people of colour. A trans rights activist, Lucia Blayke, addressed the disruption of London Pride by anti-trans protesters in 2018. "Maybe it's time," she said, "to turn down Kylie Minogue, put the cocktails down and pick up the protest signs again."

Although it was perhaps unable to represent everyone (a contributor on disability and access would have been great to see), the prevailing sentiment was for intersectionality, inclusivity and unification. Several interviewees noted that the rhetoric now targeting the trans community is eerily close to that which was aimed at gay people not so long ago.

Meanwhile, in the moving segments filmed at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, Tom Robinson performed the anthemic "(Sing if you're) Glad to be Gay", Holly Johnson delivered a flawless vocal on "The Power of Love" and Oily Alexander had the crowd on their feet for a cover of "Freedom".

As clips of the documentary were screened to a rapt audience of contributors, their appreciation of one another reinforced an essential sense of community.

It also highlighted Pride's dual purpose - to agitate for political change as well as to provide a space that's open to self-expression. And, crucially, one in which LGBT+ people are in the majority.

Twitter: @littlewondering



Oily Alexander of Years and Years celebrates at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern