

A Black woman with dark curly hair, wearing a vibrant red, long-sleeved, high-necked, floor-length dress, is walking on a paved path in a park. The path is lined with large, mature trees with thick trunks and dense green foliage. The ground is covered with fallen yellow and orange leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The lighting is warm and golden, creating long shadows on the path. In the background, a white building is partially visible through the trees.

# Coming Out as a Black Essex Girl

WORDS: ELSA JAMES  
IMAGERY: AMAAL SAID

**W**riting is not my forte, so I don't write very often. I am a conceptual visual artist making artwork using film, protest, installation and digital media. My work often addresses the historical, temporal and spatial dimensions of what it means to be black in Britain. I mention this because I had no intentions to write a piece in this Essex Girls Liberation Front (EGLF) Trawler takeover.

At 7 am one morning, a week before the print deadline, myself, Syd, Sarah, Jo and Ciara had a conversation through email finalising the text to be included in this issue. Whilst having my shower, an hour or so later, it suddenly dawned on me how valuable it could be to include my journey to claiming to be a black Essex girl, even though I knew that as a person with dyslexia, trying to fit in a piece of writing into my already busy schedule, would be a mammoth task. Nevertheless, I thought the significance of telling this journey could prove to be particularly beneficial for young black girls and womxn in the county - to celebrate defining this new 'black space' in what has historically been a white girl's narrative.

I moved to Essex from London with my partner and our eldest daughter, aged three and a half, in March 1999 but my 'coming out' began some nineteen years later. In fact, I can name the exact date - Sunday 11th March 2018. But first, let me take a step back to a couple of years ago.

International Women's Day, Metal's headquarters, Chalkwell Hall, 8th March 2017. As part of a varied programme of

events, discussion panels and readings highlighting some of the issues faced by womxn in Southend, Syd led a panel debate she titled Hooray up She Rises - What shall we do with the Essex Girl? looking at how we should move forward with our county's prevalent stereotype. It was at this event that some black womxn from Congo, South Africa and Zimbabwe said they knew ALL about the Essex girl back home. I remember thinking about this a lot afterwards, as it was a reminder of how embarrassed I was with my association of being an Essex girl. However, it was from this event that EGLF was born, as Syd quickly rallied up a group of womxn to think about tackling the stereotype at the next Village Green festival in July later that year. Understanding the enormity and seriousness of the task ahead, I became one of the 'Frontiers' - wholly immersed in campaigning to change the dictionary definition, challenging the prejudice, pitching ideas and making ambitious plans.

In the months following Village Green, I started my first solo project since leaving art school. I was interested in making work that would respond to stories of black presence in Britain prior to the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948. Working with a historian specialising in black British history, I created two short films about two black women who spent time in Essex - one during the 1700s and the other in 1908. Their stories profoundly resonated with me. However, what astonished me most was that records of their stories were just sitting in our national archives, which seemed to me to be overlooked or simply not recognised as significant. I decided to call the films \*Forgotten Black Essex and it debuted at Chalkwell Hall on 22 February 2018.

A few weeks later on the morning of the Women of the World Festival at the Southbank Center in London on Sunday 11th March 2018, without a second thought, I decided to wear our newly designed T-shirt with the words - This Is What An Essex Girl Looks Like emblazoned across the front. As I walked around the festival people stopped me and I had numerous conversations about the ridiculousness of the stereotyping of Essex people. When I got home later that evening

I sat down and took stock of my predicament, bound up in the stigma I had absorbed myself in.

Here I was, a black woman, walking around London announcing to all, 'I AM AN ESSEX GIRL'. And yet, I was embarrassed - ashamed to tell people I lived in Essex, ESPECIALLY black folks in London, who would look at me as if something might seriously be wrong with my decision to live here. I got married in the county but I was clinging onto this idea that London was everything - even though all of my critical thinking and work I conceived as an artist was made residing in the county. I had just honoured and paid homage to two extraordinary black women who were indeed part of the history of Essex. And, I had two daughters.

At that moment I decided it was time to claim

and champion 'this space'. Time to make something positive, liberating and proud about being a black woman in Essex. I thought about both historical and contemporary movements and spaces for celebrating black womxnhood - Black Girls Rock, Black Girl's Picnic, Black Girls Festival, #BlackGirlMagic and coined the term, "Black Girl Essex".

I had a conversation with my eldest daughter, who at the time was aged twenty-three, about her thoughts regarding the newly coined term and her views on the Essex girl stereotype. She revealed to me for the first time several traumatic stories she had experienced during her teens, juxtaposing her black identity in white Essex. One of which was the time when her cousin told her that his white girlfriend, with whom he lived with in London, was 'blacker' than she was because she was growing up as an Essex girl. My daughter



"And yet, I was embarrassed - ashamed to tell people I lived in Essex, ESPECIALLY black folks in London, who would look at me as if something might seriously be wrong with my decision to live here."



had gone through an identity crisis that I was unaware of. How could it be that a county could have such a strong impact on a young person's identity?

Upon hearing her stories I made the decision to explore what other black folks in Essex might be going through for themselves, with their children and whether they had gone through a similar crisis.

This summer, I got the opportunity through a four-month residency at Firstsite gallery in Colchester, to host a series of discussions with young and older members of the black community in Essex. The discussions, not

only form the basis of a new film I created titled **\*\*BLACK GIRL ESSEX: Here We Come, Look We Here**, but also for the first time these conversations with the black community in Essex, will form part of the digital sound archives at Essex Record Office.

Hosting these discussions really opened my eyes, but more so with the young black folks who all seemed to have struggled with their identity at some point. Even though I think it's possible that young black folks in any suburb or remote part of the country could struggle with their identity in the same way - I do believe Essex is particularly unique here. As Tim Burrows explained in his recent

Even though I think it's possible that young black folks in any suburb or remote part of the country could struggle with their identity in the same way - I do believe Essex is particularly unique here.

Guardian article *The Invention of Essex: how a county became a caricature*, he noticed that 'people on TV often laughed at the very word Essex'. The county had come to signify 'a land of crass consumerism' as well as being 'scorned as the crudest, stupidest symbol of Englishness'. Essex was also, Tim goes further to say, 'painted as a hotbed of bigotry, the place where white people moved to escape parts of London that were no longer white enough for them'. But surely these myths live somewhere, right?

In all of the discussions I hosted, people came away saying that they had never thought so deeply about their black identity and living in Essex before. Some even fed back to me that they found the discussion therapeutic. With this in mind, I am currently thinking about how I could extend and develop this important space for black folks in Essex.

\*Forgotten Black Essex will be screened throughout *This Is What An Essex Girl Look Like* exhibition until 17 October 2020.

\*\*BLACK GIRL ESSEX: Here We Come, Look We Here is currently showing in *Super Black*, an Arts Council Collection National Partners exhibition, at Firstsite gallery until 12 January 2020.



STILLS FROM 'BLACK GIRL ESSEX' FILMED BY ANDY DELANEY