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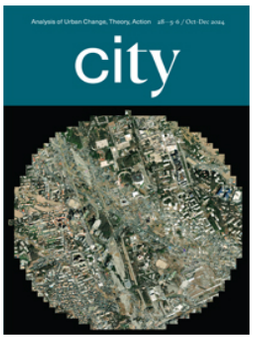

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Small Axe, directed by Steve McQueen for BBC / Amazon Studios, was released in the UK and US over Autumn-Wintser 2021/22. Across five films it acknowledges events and records experiences of African Caribbean populations in London during the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with members of the production team and mise-en-scène analysis, our aim is to understand how Small Axe contributes to the production of urban history by drawing upon archives and repurposing a cinematic archive for future use. It is an example of what Hal Foster calls 'archival art'. The first part of our analysis, on poiesis, considers the archival work carried out in the production of Small Axe; the second, on aisthesis, contemplates the anthology's configuration of a specific space and its framing of a particular sphere of experience. Our argument is that Small Axe constitutes a 'versioning' of London's post-WWII black history, a recombination of archival elements into a new sensorial archive. The concept of 'version' is taken from dub reggae and refers to new takes on, or versions of, pre-written and recorded tracks, involving innovative levels of modification and creative interpretation and/or translation for new audiences.

Keywords **London, Small Axe, Black British cinema, archives, African-Caribbean, inner city, urban crisis**

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Introduction

The *Small Axe* anthology, directed by Steve McQueen for BBC / Amazon Studios, was released in the UK and US during the Autumn and Winter of 2020–21. Across five films *Small Axe* recovers key events such as the 1971 Mangrove trial, the New Cross massacre and Brixton uprising of 1981 and provides textured, sensitive accounts of African Caribbean experience in inner city London during the 1970s and 1980s. The anthology depicts London during a moment of transition: the end of the post-war settlement, culminating in what Solomos et al. (1982) called an 'organic crisis' of capitalism. Much of the political and media focus of this crisis centred on the inner city[1], places such as Notting Hill and Brixton, which became racialised as 'symbols of absolute cultural and moral difference' (Alexander and Knowles 2005, 10). For Saumarez Smith (2016, 581) the inner city was the main arena where the British disavowal of urban modernism occurred: 'a spatially materialized locus for all that was perceived to have gone wrong with Britain's state and society in the post- war period'. As Rhodes and Brown (2019, 3244) explain, the inner city did not only refer to an urban locale but was also a 'spatial fixing' for a range of social, cultural and political anxieties. McQueen's five-part anthology is a cinematic meditation on inner city London; it is testament to Huyssen's (2023, 9) claim that, while some pasts might shrink, others expand and proliferate in the course of time.[2] And yet, *Small Axe* also verifies how London's inner cities 'were real, peopled, places – diverse and dynamic, with complex histories and registers of experience that went well beyond [...] rhetorical constructions and political anxieties' (Andrews, Kefford, and Warner 2023, 203).

Small Axe arrived at the end of a tumultuous year where Black Lives Matter protests had spread across the globe following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, including large demonstrations in London during May and June 2020. The title derives from the Wailers' track from their 1973 album *Burnin'*. The lyrics include the line: 'If you are the big tree, we are the small axe, sharpened to cut you down'. They stem from an African proverb, which held resonance in Jamaica. Its meaning can be applied to situations where the actions of the less powerful can topple even the mighty. The five films interweave historical events and biographies with fictional narratives. *Mangrove* tells the story of the historic 1971 trial of the 'Mangrove Nine', a group of Black activists who were charged with inciting a riot in response to repeated police raids on the Mangrove restaurant in Notting Hill; a fictional romance at a late-1970s blues dance in Ladbroke Grove is the focus for *Lovers Rock*; *Red, White and Blue* is a biographical story of black Metropolitan Police officer and reformer, Leroy Logan; *Alex Wheatle*, is named for its subject, the South London writer who undergoes a radical transformation after moving to Brixton as a teenager; finally, institutions for children labelled 'educationally subnormal' are the subject of *Education*.

Using a combination of semi-structured interviews with members of the production team[3], alongside a *mise-en-scène* analysis of the five films,[4] our article is concerned with how the racialised inner city of mid-to-late-twentieth century London is reconstructed and made visible in *Small Axe* and how this allows us to better understand the relationship between the city, cinema and the archive. As such, we do not present a conventional film analysis. Rather, our starting point is that *Small Axe* is an example of what Hal Foster (2004, 5)

calls 'archival art', since 'it not only draws on [...] archives but produces them as well [...]'. Such a view also acknowledges Stuart Hall's (2001, 89) argument that, '[n]o archive arises out of thin air. Each archive has a "pre-history", in the sense of prior conditions of existence'. Our objectives are to understand how McQueen's anthology contributes to 'the production of history' (Trouillot 1995) and 'the production of space' (Lefebvre 1991) by: (a) drawing upon a range of already existing archives, broadly conceived; and (b) repurposing archival materials into a *cinematic archive* of London's inner cities. As Rayner (2022, 838) suggests, cinematic archives of the city, 'open[s] perceptual vistas on the past [...] providing the potential for profound political, affective and cultural resonances'.

Our central argument is that *Small Axe* constitutes a 'versioning' of London's post-WWII black urban history, a recombination of archival elements into a new sensorial, cinematic archive. The concept of 'version' is taken from dub reggae and refers to new takes on, or *versions of,* pre-written and recorded tracks; involving, especially in Jamaican varieties, not only repetition, but innovative levels of modification and interpretation and/or translation for new audiences (see *inter alia* Veal 2007; Sullivan 2014).[5] New takes or cuts of a track are always possible, as long as an original recording exists. As Woods (2019, 191) explains, the 'version is the shadow that needs to be "found" by the producer'.

The benefits of versioning for our analysis of *Small Axe* are that it acknowledges how on one hand, black urban histories face erasure, not least as a result of gentrification and/or a post-racial narrativizing of 'diversity' where the image of blackness is seized as a tool of the powerful; but on the other hand, these pasts are being creatively recuperated and re-constructed from archival collections. As such, we point to the importance of black archives in preventing obscuration and/or erasure and making new interpretations and imaginaries of the urban past possible.

This article has four sections. The first considers relevant literature and debates in the fields of urban sociology/ geography, archive studies and film studies. The second and third sections are organised in accordance with Rancière's (2009) distinction in art between *poiesis*, 'a way of making' (112); and *aisthesis*, 'an economy of affects' (112). The section on *poiesis* considers the bringing into being of the anthology, how the urban worlds of *Small Axe* are created, paying attention to the archival work involved. The section on *aisthesis* contemplates the anthology's '[...] configuration of a specific space, [and its] framing of a particular sphere of experience' (Rancière 2009, 24). While sections two and three are organised in accordance with Rancière's distinction—which is crucial to differentiate the making of the anthology from its affective and perceptive dimensions—our analysis of *poiesis* draws considerably upon McKittrick's (2022) work on the aesthetics of Black miscellanea; and in the *aisthesis* section we use insights from Hall's (2001) seminal article 'Constituting an Archive'. The fourth section further develops our argument about *Small Axe's* 'versioning' of London's black history.

The inner city, the archive and cinema

The two inner city sites featured most prominently in the anthology—Notting Hill (including Ladbroke Grove) and Brixton—have both been the subject of

sociological and geographical urban analysis. Notting Hill is London's proto-inner city in that it was renowned for poor housing, poverty, racial conflict and social unrest before the term was imported from the US in the second half of the 1960s (Andrews, Kefford, and Warner 2023, 202). Glass (1964) refers to Notting Hill (featured in *Mangrove* and *Lover's Rock*) as a neglected, densely populated 'lodging-house district'. Black inhabitants found themselves '[...] at the tail end of the municipal housing queue; [...] they are immigrants [...] who have to take the left-overs of accommodation (Glass 1964, xxi). However, as Schofield and Jones (2019) explain, although black Britons living there faced racism, violence and discrimination, the moment when Notting Hill was first presented as emblematic of a 'race relations problem' was the so-called 'race riots' of 1958, caused by a sustained period of racist attacks on black residents. In the wake of these disturbances, Notting Hill experienced a growth in black organisations and institutions (Perry 2015). Claudia Jones, editor of the new *West Indian Gazette* organised a precursor to the Notting Hill street carnival, aimed at bolstering a legal defence fund for black people caught in the unrest (Perry 2015, 133). Notting Hill developed as an organisational hub for a variety of left wing and community organisations in opposition to far right attempts to exploit racial tensions, not least when Oswald Mosley stood for election in North Kensington in the 1959 election (Schofield and Jones 2019). The notorious slum landlord Peter Rachman rented over 144 substandard dwellings in Notting Hill, exploiting Caribbean migrants demand for basic housing (Perry 2015, 85), employing Michael de Freitas, who later became the Black Power leader Michael X, as an enforcer. De Freitas rejected his work with Rachman after meeting with Malcom X who delivered a speech in Notting Hill in 1964. Michael X would later set up the Racial Awareness Action Society. *Small Axe* picks up events in Notting Hill in *Mangrove*, the first film in the anthology, with the police raids on Frank Crichlow's Mangrove restaurant in 1968.

An early sociological account of Brixton (the location for *Alex Wheatle*) is found in Patterson's (1965) *Dark Strangers*. She explains how a residential area for wealthy merchants transformed into a twilight district of boarding and lodging houses, converted flats and single rooms that were let to recent immigrants from the Caribbean. Articulating a perspective typical of the period, Patterson expresses concern that the Caribbean 'colony' in Brixton was becoming a 'home from home' (1965, 382), meaning that the migrants would never integrate, assimilate or share 'British' values. In his analysis of the 1981 Brixton uprisings, Unsworth (1981, 65) suggests that the condition of Brixton bore testimony to Britain's economic decay, with 'the imposing facades of the great commercial institutions at the heart of the Victorian city staring out over landscapes devastated by social, economic and environmental abandonment' (Unsworth 1981, 70). Keith (1993) offers an alternative interpretation, arguing that responsibility lay with the Metropolitan police's heavy-handed use of 'sus' laws which permitted police to stop and search black people merely on the basis of suspicion of unlawful behaviour. Lord Scarman's official report references both deprivation and policing as causes of the uprising, emphasising the need to develop a consensual social order in the inner cities in the future (see Hall 1982 for a critique of the liberal roots of Scarman's report). Uprisings were understood by the right as a form of contagion associated with black

families and communities, that threatened to spread from the sites where disorder erupted (Keith 1993, 5).

Blackness was pathologised in political and public representations of the inner city, with race and criminality becoming semantically inseparable (Gilroy 1987, 106). The inner city became a spectacle: a freezing of time, space and social relations. The inner city became a *territory* to be acted upon or defended, 'a site for the exercise of state racism but also its active resistance, evident for instance in the formation of self-defence groups against far-right racist incursions and vibrant cultural forms' (Rhodes and Brown 2019, 3249–3250). However, as Eldridge (1997) argues, this period of vibrancy was fleeting, claiming that '[a]s a strategic coalition, an imagined community, a public sphere, black Britain fell to pieces' (34). The perceived 'fall' of the inner city as an agonistic, convivial space and/or public sphere, while glossing over continued efforts at anti-racist organising, is often implicitly associated with the influx of middle-class, white residents into the inner city during the 1990s. This change was reflected—welcomed even—on screen when Notting Hill was depicted as an urban village of antique stalls, bookshops, chic restaurants and white upper middle-class residents (*Notting Hill*, Roger Michell 1999) (see also Martin 2005). Brixton became a 'cosmopolitan lifestyle centre' based upon a public persona of 'funky multiculturalism' (Butler and Robson 2003, 56); a place to experience 'boutique multiculture' (Keith 2005, 181). Mavrommatis (2011) identifies a 'celebratory moment' in Brixton during the early 2000s, where blackness was sublimated as just another element of what Summer (2022) calls 'diversity branding'. We can now identify the late 1990s and much of the 2000s as a period that witnessed a 'post-roots' imagining of the inner city that attempted to displace histories of political antagonism and expressions of Blackness and/or island identities (see Bradley 2000, 431 on roots). *Small Axe* can be understood as challenging both pathologising and post-roots imaginaries of the inner city in equal measure (see also scholarly work by inter alia Mullings-Lawrence 2019; Elliott-Cooper 2018).

The archive and archiving are notions that are interpreted generously here. As Ricoeur (1978) reminds us, archives are created as much by individuals and groups as they are by state organisations and institutions. Our conception acknowledges formal archives and archiving practices but also the significance of personal collections, what Featherstone (2000) refers to as 'everyday archiving'. This encompasses collections, or even memories, relating to subaltern, racialised and minoritised groups, which Nyong'o (2018) calls 'shadow archives'. Digital advances have further expanded where we might now locate archiving practices. There is also what Stuart Hall (2001, 89) refers to as the 'living archive': the 'present, on-going, continuing, unfinished [and] open-ended' process of gathering fragments of a diasporic black experience that has, until recently, suffered from a lack of institutional interest, thereby obliging individuals to act as curators and archivists. Hall (2001) views the archive as a moment or object of reflection and debate, but also, 'the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity'. Moreover, an archive might be concerned with the past but it is always re-read in light of the present: 'and in that reprise [...] it always flashes up before us as a moment of danger' (91). In other words, a fear of erasure or a crisis of memory is crucial in providing archival practices (and archival art) with a sense of urgency. The archive therefore always 'stand[s] in

active, dialogic relation to the questions which the present puts to the past' (Hall 2001, 89). Foucault (1972)—an important influence on Hall's understanding—views the archive not as a site or institution, but rather 'the general system of the formation and transformation of statements'. The archive is, in effect, a whole discursive system and everything ordered within this system. Rancière's (2019, xi) approach is similar, arguing that 'thinking is always firstly thinking the *thinkable*' (emphasis added). Only then, can intellectual thought progress to weaving together perceptions, knowledge and affects to the extent that it becomes possible to identify and perceive the *unthinkable*.

As some scholars have argued, the city itself may be considered an archive; a material, symbolic and textual record of events, lives, culture, politics and processes. For Burgum (2022, 513) the city-as-archive 'straddles the material and symbolic city', meaning that it includes artefacts such as buildings or infrastructure as well as urban imaginaries and aesthetic styles. According to Hetherington (2013, 8), the city as an archive

> [...] reframes the city as a text or a language, or more precisely a palimpsest upon which earlier writings are effaced by later ones. It is a method that incites critical reflection on the cultural geographies of memory, allowing us to excavate the city in a way that reveals the layers which hold it up.

Such a process calls into question the singular and/or dominant narratives often linked to place (Hetherington 2013, 30). It emphasises the layering of the city; how the past 'holds up' the present. Seeing the city as an archive helps foster an awareness and attentiveness to the dynamics of power and authority which emerge from the intersection of history and territory (Burgum 2022, 513). Rao (2009, 374) suggests there are two conflicting ways in which the city may be considered an archive. The first is how the city-as-archive is a principle of ordering upon which future transactions are imagined and made present rather than a given notion of the past. This exists in tension with a second sense of city-as-archive 'that emerges in acts of preservation and strategies to inscribe space with particular social and political understanding' (374). Rao (2009, 377) argues the concept of city-as-archive should not be taken too literally, suggesting rather 'an analogical relationship between cities and archives [that] raises the question of the limits of each form'.

An important cultural medium though which the city's past is archived is cinema. Cinema captures the city as it was in a particular moment (or, in the case of *Small Axe*, the city is recreated from extant cinematic, photographic and textual sources). Cinema also reveals the spaces (and times) of the city as a principle of ordering, with characters, narratives and artefacts categorised in accordance with urban chronotopes (see Massood 2003). Penz and Lu (2011) suggest a cinematic archaeology of the city can render visible the becoming of the city and can help identify its key transformations. Sometimes, the city on film is all of that part of the city that remains. Pratt and San Juan (2014, 4) argue cinema can reveal repressed histories and/or unrealised, alternative futures. Crucially, however, the archive is not the storehouse of memory. Rather, the cinematic archive of the city—through its absences as well as its presences—'has brought visibility to the archive as a site of the breakdown of memory as well as the production of memory in the present' (2014, 12). As Rayner (2022,

837) puts it, the city as it appears in cinema can offer both 'a deconstruction and reconstruction of establishment and colloquial histories', emphasising how memory is produced rather than simply *contained* in the cinematic archive. As we go on to suggest, *Small Axe's* London is *very much* a deconstruction and reconstruction of history.

Small Axe combines two distinctive British cinematic traditions: social realism and Black British cinema. British social realist films from the 1960s exhibited a tension between the drabness and ugliness of the urban reality they depicted and seductive or poetic dimensions of this reality. Lay (2002, 22) describes this as a 'tension between sociological and poetic impulses'. Sociological realism privileges the documenting of situations and events, while poetic realism foregrounds aesthetics, working 'as a kind of antidote to the distance created by the cold and analytical documentary "look"' (Lay 2002, 22). *Small Axe* is also influenced by the legacy of Black British Cinema. The cinematic archive available to McQueen includes films (and directors) such as *Pressure* (Horace Ové 1976), *Babylon* (Franco Rosso 1980), *Burning an Illusion* (Menelik Shabazz 1981), *Blood Ah Go Run* (Menelik Shabazz 1981), *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah 1986) and *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien 1991). While underappreciated commercially and beset with censorship struggles (Nwonka 2021), the Black British cinematic archive that influences McQueen is considerable. Although McQueen states of his anthology that 'these films should have been made 35 years ago, 25 years ago, but they weren't [...]'[6], some of these events and topics *have* been previously committed to cinema. For example, the New Cross Massacre scene in *Alex Wheatle* —comprised of photographic stills accompanied by Linton Kwesi Johnson reciting his poem 'New Cross Massahkah'—is heavily indebted to Menelik Shabazz's *Blood Ah Go Run* (1981). Moreover, another of Shabazz's films –*The Story of Lover's Rock* (2011)—is a forerunner to (and clearly informs) the anthology's most celebrated film, *Lover's Rock*.

Poiesis: archives and the cinematic reconstruction of the inner city

McQueen is an 'archival artist' in that he seeks to 'make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present' (Foster 2004, 4). The city itself an important focus of his attention. The streets of Brixton and Notting Hill are shot on location and recreated from photographs, film and cinema from the period (see Figure 1). McQueen layers historical details onto actual locations, gathering together *miscellanea* such as cars, shopfronts, and fashions in service of a thick representation of 'Black Atlantic livingness' (McKittrick 2022, 4). This 'convergence of the film and the archive' (Rayner 2022, 929) reassembles, but also creates cultural memory.

Small Axe also reconstructs urban interiors such as front rooms, classrooms, kitchens, barbershops and record shops (see Figure 2). This historical accuracy of cinematic reconstructions is dependent on existing archives and artistic works. For example, the family spaces in *Lover's Rock* and *Education* are reminiscent of Michael McMillan's installation of the Caribbean front room at the Geffrye Museum (2005–6) (see McMillan 2009a; 2009b) (see Figure 2). Family spaces are

Figure 1: Atlantic Road, Brixton (from *Alex Wheatle*).

often missing in portrayals of black urban experience (McMillan 2009a; 2009b). McQueen's African Caribbean front rooms, a recurring feature across the anthology, similarly raise issues 'about mis(sed) representations, struggles over meaning, and authenticity' and 'the legitimacy and policing of representation of the black British experience' (McMillan 2009a, 136).

The recreation of the interior and ambience of a Brixton barbershop in *Alex Wheatle* (see Figure 3)—replete with boxing posters, brylcreem, duralon combs and photographs of popular styles—pays homage to the significance of such spaces in formations of black British masculinity, culture and community, whilst also referencing the work of artists such as British-Jamaican artist Hurvin Anderson, who describes the milieu of the barbershop as 'somewhere that had been forgotten, some sort of secret meeting hall'.[7] In *Education*, the

Figure 2: 1970s Front Room at Museum of the Home - Image credit Gifty Dzenyo.

Figure 3: The Brixton barbershop (from *Alex Wheatle*).

interior of the Smith children's bedrooms (toys, posters, magazines) makes evident their respective ambitions, which are then also articulated in their bedtime prayers: Kingsley (Kenyah Sandy) to explore space as an astronaut and Stephanie (Tamara Lawrance) to work in Paris as a fashion designer. This is poignant because it shows that despite the difficulties the family face, its younger generation were not deterred from dreaming. Placed alongside scenes of black people immersed in everyday activities at home or in community spaces, images of urban rebellion can be understood as anomalous and unusual (Connell 2012).

Collating and curating a selection of political posters, pamphlets and books makes the charged atmosphere of inner city London perceptible; as does the acknowledgement of London's Black intellectual cultures through the portrayal of figures such as Darcus Howe (Malachi Kirby) and Althea Jones-Lecointe (Leititia Wright) in *Mangrove*; and C.L.R. James (Derek Griffiths) and his book *Black Jacobins,* in both *Alex Wheatle* and *Mangrove*. In *Mangrove* political posters adorn the walls of the Notting Hill restaurant, warning diners to 'know your oppressor'. There is a stop motion interlude between courtroom scenes where a range of archived posters and leaflets appear in a collage on the screen (see Figure 4). The use of artefacts here is reminiscent of Virgillo Hunter's 2021 exhibition 'Defend Yourself' at Brixton's Black Cultural Archives[8], which featured letters, pamphlets and posters relating to the Brixton Defence Campaign that was set up in the aftermath of the 1981 uprisings. The role of archives in the creation of contemporary exhibitions about Black urban politics (and by extension art) is recognised by Hunter, who told us:

> People don't know about the work that the community did in the aftermath [of 1981] to protect itself from these outside entities that were trying to co-opt the narrative. I think the Black Cultural Archives has a leading role in that; like 'listen, we have these documents, no-one has touched them in ages, it's time for new perspectives' [...]

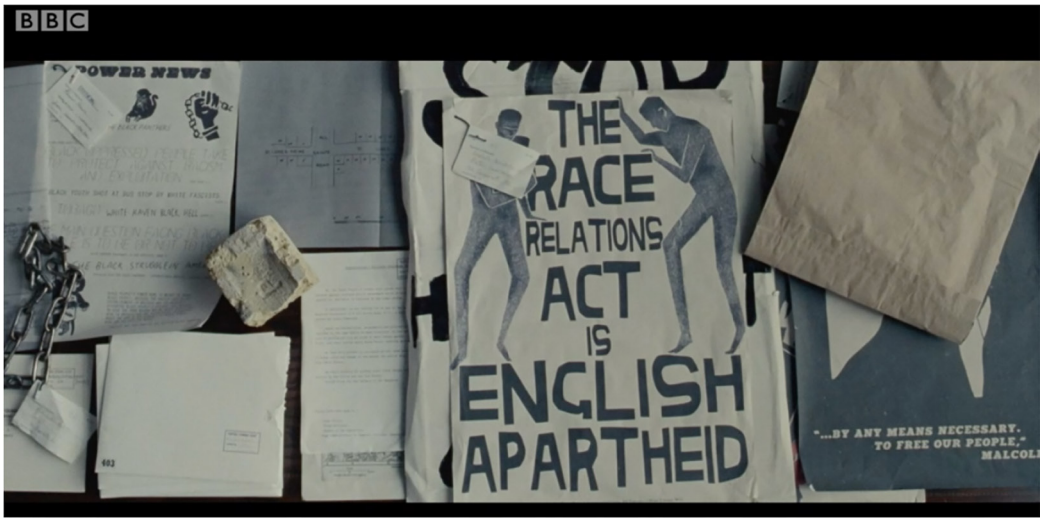

Figure 4: Political posters and leaflets (*Mangrove*).

The revisiting of archives of political leaflets and posters pertaining to events in 1971 and 1981 is a reminder of how the injunctions of the present—for example, the fear of erasure; renewed curiosity about histories of Black political struggles in London following BLM; a longing for the political cultures of the pre-gentrified inner city (Bonnett 2010)—create the conditions within which archival art takes priority. Benjamin (1986) in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, calls this 'the moment of danger', where a fear of loss of cultural memory creates a sense of incredible urgency. The existence of archives and archivists, and the subsequent archival work of the scholar or artist—who each practices a specific form of 'textual accumulation' (McKittrick 2022)—are necessary in attempts to recoup and reconfigure these pasts. They are the means and manner of its (re)making.

The attention to *miscellanea* (McKittrick 2022) is one of the most notable features of *Small Axe*. Miscellanea are integrated into a realist style, combining sociological and poetic aspects, that opens rather imposes meaning. For example, items included in *Education* (set in 1972) that we noted in our *mise-en-scene* analysis include: religious plates and figurines; blue kitchen cupboards; Greater London Police Monitoring group leaflet about stop and search; Spurs poster; Neil Armstrong mug in Kingsley's bedroom; Bernard Coard's book: *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*; Stephanie's fashion magazines. Realism was the chosen aesthetic for the anthology because the topics and stories of *Small Axe* are seen to *require* realism but also because realism is itself an archival *detail* taken from Black British cinema of the time. As Courttia Newland, co-writer on *Lover's Rock* explains to us:

> I think realism was just like that's what we were doing, like I said telling historical period pieces, but not period in the way that you might have seen before. [...] I felt with *Small Axe* it's a real opportunity to tell these social realist stories in their social realist style [...]

The fashions of the time are pored over across the anthology, with hair styles and clothes exploring the subtle differences of style between the late 1970s, early

and mid 1980s. Diegetic music is historically appropriate, from reggae hits such as Janet Kay's 'Silly Games' and The Revolutionaries' 'Kunta Kinde' (both *Lover's Rock*) to popular hits such as Billy Joel's 'Uptown Girl' in *Red, White and Blue* and The Pretenders' 'Brass in Pocket' in *Alex Wheatle*. The dialogue coach Hazel Holder was employed to train actors in the Black British speech conventions of the time. McKittrick (2022) argues that either as single items or combination with one another, miscellanea create moments or 'slivers' of clarity about black livingness that 'unravel as lessons, cautionary tales, and secrets' (2022, 3); and that, crucially, do so without reproducing 'an intellectual economy that is oversaturated with racial violence' (2022, 3). The realism of *Small Axe*—the revisiting of historical events; reconstructions of urban locations; the inclusion of historical artefacts; the accumulation of texts; and making perceptible the sounds and styles of the period—creates cultural memories of lives defined by more than trauma or stigma: of loving families, work, worship, culture and resistance.

Poiesis is about *doing* and *making*; the techniques and practices through which art is brought into existence. As Becker (1982, 1) puts it, [a]ll artistic work, [...] involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation'. In two lengthy interview excerpts, each worth considering in full, we examine reflections on the processes and techniques of *poiesis* from individuals who comprise the 'art world' (Becker 1982, 1) of *Small Axe*. The first is from an interview with Alastair Siddons, who co-wrote the *Mangrove* screenplay with Steve McQueen:

> It was very important to Steve to nail the historical accuracy. I have a documentary background and I think he recognized that. I was obsessed with the story and I kept coming up with things [...] such as the only newspaper to serialize the court case [...] Because I had done so much research on the court case, by the time we started writing the beginning of Mangrove I felt like I knew a lot by that point, which helped when trying to put words in the mouths of brilliant people like Altheia Jones-LeCointe. [...] For me, it was just old fashioned research [...] I scoured eBay for those obscure publications and hit gold with a Trinidadian dictionary called *Creole Talk* that was published in 1971. [...] I had a friend at the BBC who managed to find this amazing [...] 16 mm film reel that included Darcus in the basement of the Mangrove. Material like that got me absolutely obsessed with what they might have said. The court case, which came first, was 55 days long [...] and we had to squash that down to roughly 55 minutes of an hour of television. Our guiding principle was to build from what we knew definitely happened. There weren't transcripts—those had been destroyed—but there were snippets from the newspaper that serialised the case. The white lawyer, Ian Macdonald, who represented Barbara Beese, very kindly gave us all his files [...] that's where we found Darcus' closing speech.[9]

Siddons account reveals the affinity, or shared conventions, between his research and documentary-making background and McQueen's cinematic project. He notes the layering of knowledge over time—gained from a variety of archival sources (newspapers, dictionaries, film, legal files)—and the process of building from 'what we knew definitely happened' to write a screenplay that

was historically plausible. The second excerpt is from 'Rachel' who worked as a senior researcher on *Small Axe*:

> I knew this was for drama but I very much treated it as a journalistic exercise because I felt that it was really important that we got to interview as many people as we could because the brief was extremely open [...] I knew it was going to be about West Indians in London, [...] starting from 1968, to the early 80s, and what I thought, the way I thought I'd approach it was to look at all the seminal events that had happened to West Indians and to black people in London and then to research around that [...] I wanted to kind of get a sense what the atmosphere was like, particularly in those four years, '68, '69, '70 and '71 [leading to the Mangrove trial] so you go to the people that are the main protagonists, yes, but then I was also interested in what ordinary people had to say, so I did interview people who were living round All Saints Road, in parts of Brixton, who would have known the Darcus Howes and the Frank Crichlows. As we went on there were certain themes that were coming out, one of the main ones being police brutality, police harassment. [...] But then obviously I thought well, I've got to speak to some policemen as well, [...] I did in total speak to probably close to ten policemen, who spoke with varying degrees of candour about the conduct at that time. [...] As with all research, you can interview people but I just felt that I needed to back things up with facts, so there was a lot of time spent at the national archives and the George Padmore Institute, I mean Sarah Garrod who's the archivist there is possibly one of the most important people in Britain, in the world of black history because the way she has so meticulously compiled and kept those archives was really something quite extraordinary, one person on her own.

'Rachel' explains an extraordinary commitment to research, conducting interviews with important figures as well as 'ordinary people' and Police officers, as well as triangulating individual accounts with archival sources. What both accounts reveal is the division of labour that goes into (re)producing the cinematic times and spaces of *Small Axe*, which aim for historically *authenticity* via the inclusion of miscellanea; but, also, are *sincere* in the sense of the commitment of the art world who co-operate with each other to bring the anthology into existence. These relationships, between members of the production team, archivists such as Sarah Garrod at the George Padmore Institute (mentioned above by 'Rachel'), collectors, interviewees and audience members implies a social, inter-subjective world beyond miscellanea. As John L. Jackson Jr. (2005, 15) explains,

> [a] mere object could never be sincere, even if it is authentic. Sincerity is a trait of the object's maker [...] but never the object itself [...]. Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison between subjects [...]. Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, interiority and subjectivity. It is a subject-subject interaction, not the subject-object model that authenticity presumes [...].

In attempting to understand the *poiesis* of Small Axe, it is therefore necessary to connect the materiality—the carefully sourced *miscellanea*—with the extensive networks of co-operation that comprise the anthology's art world. In turn, this collaboration relies on the extant labour of individuals or groups who collected

and categorised memories and artefacts relating to black life in London, details that mainstream archives have tended to ignore. There is a reciprocity at play here too. As Menelik Shabazz, the director of three seminal Black British films (mentioned above) that influenced the anthology—and therefore someone who may be considered part of the wider art world of *Small Axe*—told us shortly before he passed:

> I'm very pleased that my work still has resonance because that's what you ask for when you produce the work, that people are still wanting to see it all the time, and I look at my work as one that has longevity, that's what I always wanted [...].

A sense of gratitude is felt here, in that Shabazz is delighted his seminal, revolutionary work has a legacy through *Small Axe*; that his own achievements are part of a sincere, ongoing liaison between Black British filmmakers; and who, as a collective, continue to act as highly influential social interlocutors.

To conclude this section, it is crucial to recognise that none of the archive material that *Small Axe* draws upon is yet lost or erased, but we should not underestimate the effort, dedication and care required to find, document, collect and keep such details 'alive'. Nor should we underestimate the sense of urgency to carry out this work *now*, before erasure occurs, and that all archival work is historically situated, and is 'especially the case in relation to work from the Afro-Caribbean and Asian diasporas [due to] the absence of any sustained attention or critical dialogue within the dominant institutions of the art world' (Hall 2001, 91). By inserting fragments and miscellanea into the archival art that is *Small Axe*, they are claimed from the archive, but also thematically organised and categorised within the discursive structures of the films in which they are featured. As a 'versioning' of the archive of black London, of the inner city, *Small Axe* is a moment that is both an ending and a beginning—an invitation for further expansion: 'not an inert museum of dead works, but a "living archive" whose constitution must be seen as an ongoing never-completed project' (Hall 2001, 89). McQueen's anthology is both evidence of this living archive and a contribution to it.

Aisthesis: 'The portrait or the picture that we're in'

In explaining the notion of *aisthesis*, Rancière (2019, xii) argues that artistic works can disrupt the 'sensible' fabric of experience. They cannot induce decisive political change but can influence the way the social world is perceived.[10] As was established in the previous section, such artistic works do not appear from nowhere or without history, but rather condense and recombine 'features of regimes of perception and thought that precede them, and are formed elsewhere' (Rancière 2019, xii). The archival art of *Small Axe* is a sustained engagement with this 'elsewhere'; it constitutes '*an interruption* in a settled [historical] field' (Hall 2001, 92 emphasis in original).

The events and experiences resurrected by *Small Axe* are largely omitted from London's best-known published histories, save for cursory mentions of geographical areas of black settlement and / or the 1958 Notting Hill and 1981 Brixton uprisings, usually referred to as inner city riots (e.g. Ackroyd 2001; Inwood 1998; Porter 1994; White 2008). *Small Axe* is a claim on the right to

narrate London's history from a black / African-Caribbean perspective. Courttia Newland captures this sense of accomplishment:

> I knew it was special when we were in the writer's room I was saying to everybody, 'd'you realise how big this is? D'you realise what we're doing here?' and I'm getting all excited! So yes this means everything, it means, it's really putting your footprints down [...] and it's there now forever.

Courttia's evoking of a 'footprint' is a reminder that, as Hall (2001, 89) puts it, the archive is a moment that signifies 'the end of a certain kind of creative innocence; and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness'. The cinematic event, like other kinds of event, reconfigures history; but also, as art, 'supposes that somebody is there in order to perceive it' (Boltanski 2018, 58). The anthology invites a variety of publics to engage with it; most notably, as Newland acknowledges, a black audience—a renewed incarnation of Eldridge's (1997) Black British public sphere perhaps—who are eager to picture themselves participating in and making London's history. Indeed, Nwonka (2020) describes *Small Axe* as a 'black event' in that it provided a weekly opportunity for black Britons to congregate around a rare screening of black identity and history. Implicitly this acknowledges Rancière's (2011, 22) argument that cinema 'requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the "story" and make it their own story'. As McQueen explains, 'the fact of having that platform and having that canvas, is also allowing us to talk about [...] the portrait or the picture that we're in, that we are part of this story and we've changed things in a way that can never be reversed'.[11] The anthology is a moment of archival and artistic accomplishment, but also an invitation for others to see also themselves in the picture; to translate the past in relation to their own realities.

In highlighting the significance of *Small Axe,* it is necessary to retrace the ways in which black life in Britain has previously been narrated, represented and understood, to acknowledge the ugly archive of negative stereotyping and assumptions about black identities and black cultures that have generated false causal associations between blackness, criminality and urban decline. Wynter (1992) addresses how representations of blackness are expressed as a system of knowledge that denies black humanity. Other scholars have suggested that black life in Britain suffers from a 'minoritized absence/pathologized presence' paradox (Phoenix 1987, 51; see also Gilroy 1987, 18; Lewis 2017), whereby it is either hyper visible for negative reasons or invisible due to sanitised or ethnocentric representations.

Small Axe deconstructs the archive that views blackness and the inner city in only a negative or derogatory manner. Rather, it advances *re*constructive Black archival practices, such as those found at London's George Padmore Institute and Black Cultural Archives, of accounting for the manifold, varied contributions of black Londoners (see Ishmael et al. 2020). Interviewees revealed the degree to which London's black histories had been confined generationally and/ or obscured, but were made perceptible by the anthology. 'Rachel', senior researcher on *Small Axe,* recalled:

> It was breathtakingly overwhelming, the amount of people that would write, 'well I knew nothing about the Mangrove case, I've lived in Britain, I'm 40 years old and

> I knew nothing about it' [...] These stories were quite well known amongst black people of a certain age but certainly not out there in the public consciousness, and what was so phenomenal about what Steve McQueen did and the producers and the writers, they were able to turn these stories into beautiful dramas that would really make people sit up and listen and question.

Alex Wheatle, writer and consultant to the anthology and the subject of one the films, commented similarly:

> I've been overwhelmed with responses, especially people approaching me or contacting me and saying it's about time that these narratives, these black narratives that have been hidden for so long, now everyone has the opportunity to experience them. 'It's been a long time coming', has been the usual comment. The Mangrove story for example, [...] so people would say to me 'did this really happen? Oh my god how did I miss this, how come this narrative hasn't been shown on TV before?'

'Rachel' and Alex provide evidence of the lack of understanding of London's post-war black history but they also point to how the anthology not only educates viewers but encourages them to be curious *why* they were not familiar with this history.

In presenting a richer sense of London's history *Small Axe* sketches a map of black London that 'makes spatial connections meaningful' (De Nardi 2018, 4). *Small Axe* arrives at a moment when new books are being published on Black London, walking tours of Black are flourishing and new Nubian Jak historical markers are being added to buildings across London each month (see Nanton and Burton 2021; Warner 2022). Such spatial and historical interventions, always the result of archival research, are contributing to the 'release' of the inner city from its political territorialisation during the 1970s and 1980s (Rhodes and Brown 2019). Like Foster's (2004) understanding of archival art, which proposes 'new orders of affective association', *Small Axe* similarly proposes associations of black livingness between sites and times of injustice, emancipation and the everyday.

In terms of unjust or troubled spaces, these include the children's home in Shirley Oaks, Surrey where Alex is forced to wear a strait jacket, Atlantic Road in Brixton, during the 1981 insurrection (both *Alex Wheatle*); Durant's School in Barnet (the ESN school to which Kingsley is sent in *Education*); the Old Bailey cell where Frank Crichlow, owner of the Mangrove restaurant, is detained (*Mangrove*); Grenfell Tower (*Mangrove*, using CGI the tower can be seen under construction); and the industrial estate in West London where Leroy Logan's father is brutally beaten by the Metropolitan Police (*Red, White and Blue*). A notable example is the montage sequence dedicated to the New Cross Massacre in *Alex Wheatle*. The film is set in Brixton, and parts of it in 1981, which means it would be natural for Alex and friends to discuss the tragedy that unfolded close by, at a party at 439 New Cross Road on the night of 18 January earlier that year, where 13 young black people died in a fire believed to have been started by the National Front. The inclusion of (and connections between) these sites across the five films is an attempt, rather like historical markers, to inscribe these times and spaces onto a city that is often reluctant to dwell on its imperial and racist past.

McQueen marks these spaces alongside less traumatic, more quotidian and occasionally joyful sites. In addition to a succession of carefully recreated front rooms, barbershops and bedrooms (discussed earlier), the anthology takes in post-WWII bomb sites where children are seen playing, the Black People's Information Centre in Notting Hill (both *Mangrove)*; a house at the corner of Ladbroke Road and Horbury Crescent in Notting Hill (the site of the party in *Lover's Rock*); a school, Brixton market, a reggae record shop and a social services office (*Alex Wheatle*); an athletics track, factory floor, Hendon Police College, multi-storey carpark, youth club, police station canteen and common room (*Red, White and Blue*); a town hall, Saturday morning supplementary school and a school bus (*Education*). Black livingness is made visible in domestic scenes of the morning rush before school (*Education*), family dinners (*Red, White and Blue*) or getting into bed after a long night of dancing and getting acquainted with someone special (*Lover's Rock*). It is in this manner also, that *Small Axe* sidesteps the social scientific obsession with 'identifying the "where" of blackness in positivist terms [which] can reduce black lives to essential measurable "facts" rather than presenting communities that have struggled, resisted, and significantly contributed to the production of [urban] space' (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 6). *Small Axe* does not impose a hierarchy of sites of black livingness: public spaces, interior spaces, dramatic spaces, everyday spaces and spaces of intense human connection are presented as equally important. And also, following Rao's (2009) argument about the city-as-archive, *Small Axe* respects how various locations in London—from front rooms and barbershops to police training colleges, community centres and the site of the New Cross massacre—are also a way of categorising and ordering knowledge about black livingness in the city.

As Hall (2001) argues is the case with any archive, the archive of *Small Axe* is not complete. It is obviously London-centric, overlooking spaces of black settlement across the nation as well as those that existed prior to the arrival of the Windrush in 1948. The films also maintain what Pitts (2019) refers to as the Caribbeanisation of Black Britain, which excludes the experiences of Britons of West-African and East-African heritage. Moreover, the stories of women are given less room. With the exception of a small number of characters, British Black Panthers leader and scientist, Altheia Jones-Le Cointe (Letitia Wright) and activist Barbara Beese (Rochenda Sandall), both in *Mangrove*; as well as *Lover's Rock's* lead, Martha (Amarah-Jae St Aubyn), female characters are largely in supporting roles. 'Rachel', the researcher for the anthology, explained why she wanted to do more work to bring their stories to screens:

> These are the heroes of the Black British identity who we never get to hear about. When feminism is discussed, we're not hearing these names. I can name you ten white feminists, the intersections are just not there. These women were not just activists in their feminist struggle or a political struggle, these women were writing, they were leading marches, they were leading movements, they were bringing up children, they were married or they were in relationships, and people don't know about them.

Rachel's perspective is supported by the recently published *Speak Out!* an anthology of writing from the 1970s and 1980s by members of the Brixton Black Women's Group and the reissue, in 2018, of Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe's seminal text *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in*

Britain, originally published in 1985. These silences in *Small Axe* are not due to an archival absence, indeed, black women *were* documenting their experiences and struggles (see also Mirza 1997); but rather, points to the *vastness* of the living archive and how any interpretation of archives will always be partial and selective (Hall 2001).

To conclude this section on *aisthesis*, is worth bringing attention to Paul Gilroy's comments, made in conversation with Steve McQueen around the time of the release of the anthology. This dialogue is specifically concerned with the *Mangrove* film:

> [Y]ou've taken the photographs that were made at the time of the demonstrations and you've brought them to life in a way that is incredibly vivid and extraordinary. Because again, you think you know what happened and you've got an idea from looking at those old black and white photographs that people like Horace Ové took of that demonstration [but] I don't have a vocabulary available for how you've brought it to life in a way that's so vivid. (Paul Gilroy[12])

As Gilroy notes, it is difficult to describe how art can take something that already exists, such as Horace Ové's photograph of the Mangrove demonstrations (see Figure 5), and somehow make its presence more lively, *more intense*. Rancière (2014, 49–50) attempts to explain the process thus: 'it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the human perceptible, felt'. What is revealed by the versioning of the archival past in *Small*

Figure 5: Darcus Howe Mangrove Demonstration (Sir Horace Ové / Horace Ové Archives).[13]

Axe, in a profound sense, are important aspects of London's (in)visible black histories and the potential for these images, words, artefacts and styles—alone or in combination with one another—to create memories, histories, geographies, publics, perceptions and affective responses.

Version city

Our analysis of the bringing into being of inner city London (*poiesis*) and the novel perceptive regime created by the anthology (*aisthesis*) has so far been implicitly urban. For example, we have pointed to the lack of public understanding of London's black histories, the ability of the city to function as an unofficial archive of these histories and how formal and informal black or shadow archives are necessary for work that seeks to recover these histories in artistic or scholarly form. We have also drawn attention to the stigmatisation and racialisation of London's inner cities in the second half of the twentieth century and the forms of social, cultural and political survival and resistance forged in this milieu.

Of particular interest to urban scholars, however, is how the archival art of *Small Axe* extends and expands the city-as-archive. Accounts of the city-as-archive work differently to historicist accounts in that they understand the city as the arbiter of history and memory, the terrain where traces excluded from formal archives may be found, but also the site where people organise and assemble to bring attention to absences and/or controversies in legitimised historical accounts. Our argument builds from Rayner's (2022, 829) statement that the 'role of moving images in the recording, recollection and memorialisation of cities [...], and their consequent creation of meaningful, readable, urban visual "archives" [is] distinct from but in many ways complementary to more conventional historical [...] collections'. The archival art that constructs the inner city of the 1970s and early 1980s in *Small Axe* adds layer upon layer of history like a palimpsest, a way of reading the city 'historically, intertextually, constructively and deconstructively' (Huyssen 2003, 7). It achieves this by visiting actual city locations and furnishing these with historical artefacts and miscellanea, utilising audio such as period reggae and pop music, whilst incorporating visual styles from realist and Black British cinema as well as fashions and biographical narrative; sometimes it recreates locations that no longer exist, that have been erased from the city-as-archive. Working with and complementing black archives as well as exploring the city-as-archive, the anthology assembles a cinematic 'meta archive' —an archive of archives—a *recombination* of a fragmented, scattered history rather than a fabrication; that, as Hall (2001, 89) explains of the living archive, comprises a new work that 'will come to constitute significant additions to the archive' but, importantly, 'will not be the same as that which was produced earlier, but will be related to that body of work, if only in terms of how it inflects or departs from it'. The inflections or interpretations of the archive/s in *Small Axe* are therefore key.

The technique and practice of 'versioning' in the remixing cultures of reggae is a useful analogy. Versioning in a creative studio practice, involving collaboration between artists—some not involved in the original recording—where an alternate cut of a previously recorded track is made. In simple terms, a new track is made from an existing track. Many recognisable elements from the original will remain,

some features will be enhanced, dissonance may be amplified, original vocals removed, or distorted, or replaced with new vocals, sometimes communicating a different but related narrative to the original track, known as 'toasting'. As Partridge (2010, 63) clarifies, versions 'aren't necessarily an improvement on the original and, moreover, nor do they try to be. Rather they are understood as interpretations—texts that have been translated into a different musical language'. Hebdige (2003, 14) explains how in versioning '[t]he original version takes on a new life and meaning in a fresh context. [...] It's a democratic principle because it implies no one has the final say. Everybody has a chance to make a contribution'. Meanwhile, Gilroy (1987, 209) suggests reggae consciously reconstructs its own histories 'to a point where an alternative sense of time and the historical process is one of the most important effects of the constant repetition (versioning) of particular pieces of music'. To apply this to *Small Axe*, versioning is a technique through which that which already exists—actual spaces of the inner city such as Notting Hill and Brixton, miscellanea, formal and informal black archives, individual biographies, recorded music, the legacy of Black British cinema—are recombined, breathing new life into them, in the process creating something novel, a multi-dimensional urban reality that sits in productive tension between the present and past; an archival work but also an 'object [and moment] of reflection and debate' (Hall 2001, 89). As Woods (2019, 188) explains, dub versions of the A-sides of reggae singles presented an opportunity for meditation and 'reflection on the vocal message' of the original track. The repetition inherent in versioning creates 'a cyclical feeling of solidness or consistency' (Woods 2019, 188). In the case of *Small Axe*, the 'messages' are those that were submerged or obscured within London's black archives and the city-as-archive. The anthology affords these histories solidity, consistency and publicity. In its ability to offer a new 'perceptual vista' (Rayner 2022, 838) on the past, *Small Axe* is at the vanguard of a contemporary 'post-post roots' reconsideration and revaluation of London's inner cities; a reminder of and a return to—in the dual age of revanchist gentrification *and* Black Lives Matter—their black histories and continued deep resonance within the African-Caribbean diasporic urban experience.

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Notes

1 As Andrews, Kefford, and Warner (2023, 202) state: The term 'inner city' emerged in the United States in the 1960s to describe the largely black neighbourhoods surrounding 'downtown' areas shaped by white flight, deindustrialization, the blighting effects of urban renewal and territorial stigmatization wrought by endemic racism'.

2 See Webb (2014) for a broader discussion of cinema relating to this period of urban crisis.

3 Fifty interviews on the topic of black history and heritage in London were conducted as part of a larger research project, titled Archiving the Inner City: Race and the politics of urban memory.

4 Key scenes from each film were selected for an analysis focusing on setting, locale, props, costume and composition.

5 Version City is also the name of a track on The Clash's 1980 album *Sandinista!*

6 *Sight and Sound,* December 2020, 30 (10) p. 26.

7 https://www.phillips.com/article/16897799/attic-barbershop-anderson

8 https://www.bcaexhibits.org/exhibits/brixtondefence

9 https://www.awardsdaily.com/2020/11/20/how-research-allowed-to-alastair-siddons-to-nail-every-detail-for-steve-mcqueens-mangrove/
10 Rancière (2014, 15) argues that cinema always seems to say '[t]hese are the limits of what I can do. The rest is up to you'.
11 Paul Gilroy in conversation with Steve McQueen, available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/racism-racialisation/transcript-conversation-steve-mcqueen (accessed 5 January 2021).
12 See above.
13 Available at: https://www.horaceove.com/photography-1/blackpower-dh6r2

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