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'It Made Our Eyes Get Bigger:' Youth Filmmaking and Place-Making in East London

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Abstract

Drawing on two years of ethnographic research in London, this article describes how participatory youth filmmaking projects act as a deliberate intervention into young peoples' experiences of place and space. I propose that filmmaking can be understood as a means for young people to re-construct and imagine both familiar and unfamiliar spaces by utilizing the specific sensorial affordances of filmmaking. Acknowledging that producing a film is not only a technical but also a social, creative and embodied process, I discuss how filmmaking mediates young peoples' experiences and invites them to experience a heightened perceptual attention to their surroundings by creating new forms of 'sensing place.'

Keywords

Participatory filmmaking; Youth; Place-making; London

Introduction

Long before the massive building efforts leading up to the 2012 London Olympics commenced, the Lea River Valley in East London, had been in flux (Coles, et al. 2012). From a nature reserve built on a disused industrial filtration system to a former flour mill now used as a film studio, to a series of bustling multi-ethnic, multi-lingual markets, the areas surrounding this now largely-defunct industrial canal had seen successive waves of mass-scale industry, immigration, and 'regeneration'. This heritage influences the current experience of the spaces of the Lea Valley for its residents. For local young people, movement around and through these places is both an unremarkable daily occurrence and a journey imbricated within wider processes of power and social change (Kennelly and Watt 2012).

(INSERT FIG. 1)

This article describes a particular intervention into young peoples' experience of place and space in East London. As construction for the London 2012 Olympics began in earnest, a group of young people, two professional filmmakers and a teacher, made a series of participatory videos about the history and landscape of the Lea Valley. Placing this project within the context of two years of ethnographic research, I explore how the act of youth filmmaking can be understood as an

intervention into young peoples' sense of place (Feld and Basso 1996) and its corollary, their sense of belonging (Osler and Starkey 2003).

Based on the case study of the filmmaking project *The River*, along with my research on similar projects throughout London, I suggest that youth filmmaking is a means for young people to re-construct and imagine both familiar and unfamiliar spaces. The heightened auditory and visual registers required for filming encourage young people to extend and enhance their embodied experiences of place. Highlighting that filmmaking is a technical, social, creative and embodied process, here I explore the means through which young filmmakers attune themselves perceptually to new ways of looking at, listening to, and experiencing the world around them.

Youth filmmaking cannot be fully understood, however, without briefly acknowledging the wider context, in the academic literature and popular press (and, more generally, the popular imagination) regarding how young people are understood as occupying space. By placing a specific youth filmmaking project within the context of research on and representation of young people and place, I demonstrate how the activity of encouraging young peoples' sense of 'belonging' in and to discreet places through filmmaking is reflective of wider ideological aims – in particular to encourage forms of 'place-attachment' that do not threaten other civic interests.

I begin by offering a definition of 'youth filmmaking,' describing the practice of participatory filmmaking as it has developed as an educational intervention in London. As a visual anthropologist, I have approached the study of youth filmmaking by emphasizing the processual nature of cultural production (in the same vein as anthropological production studies of journalism, for example in Bird 2010). After describing the methodologies I used to study and analyze this collective practice of filmmaking, I briefly explore their methodological implications.

Next, I contextualize my research within wider phenomenological understandings of 'place-making' inspired by work from anthropology and social geography. Turning to my fieldwork, I draw on material from across a range of research materials to suggest an overall typology for understanding the articulations of place as a key organizing principle in the researched youth filmmaking initiatives. From exploring *familiar places* to participating in planning consultations for imagined *future places*, youth filmmaking projects engage with place in both spatial and temporal registers.

Finally, I turn to a more fine-grained analysis of *The River*, a specific youth filmmaking project I studied in the Lea Valley, East London, to demonstrate how this process of 'place-making' occurs in practice during the pre-production, production and post-production phases of creating a film. This section incorporates an analysis of the ways in which youth filmmaking enacts as a tool for sensorial place-making by inviting young people to experience an enhanced version of their own embodied sensorial experiences. I detail the short-term implications of this type of intervention, drawing links between the young peoples' experiences as filmmakers

and wider visual anthropological understandings of filmmaking as an embodied practice. I discuss the relationship between place-making and narrative, detailing how in the process of journeying through new or familiar spaces young people are also enabled to chart their own 'stories' of place.

I conclude by questioning how the organizers of the project under consideration here positioned it as a productive intervention into youth place-making, in contrast to the wider social imaginary of young people as potentially problematic inhabitants of space. The main focus of this article is on the embodied *process* through which filmmaking enables young people to frame and focus their vision, to select one sight from 'an infinity of other possible sights,' (Berger 1972: 10). However, while the outcome of these initiatives are often described unproblematically as 'positive' by their initiators, I will briefly explore the ways in which they are also reflective of wider forms of 'governmentality' (Rose 2001; Rose 1999). Thus, the process of encouraging a sense of 'belonging' through filmmaking, as in *The River*, and the corollary initiatives described here, is inherently a space of contestation.

Defining youth filmmaking

Although participatory filmmakingⁱ projects do not exclusively target young people (Lunch and Lunch 2006; Shaw and Robertson 1997; White 2003), I have chosen to focus on youth filmmaking for both practical and theoretical reasons. During the period of my fieldwork from 2006-2009, youth filmmaking initiatives were abundant in London, a growth attributed by project facilitators not only to increasingly affordable technologies but also to an upswing in interest in 'participation' as a cultural policy agenda under the center-left New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the UK (Newman 2001). This was exemplified by the advent of a specific fund for UK youth media in 2006 called Mediabox (Mediabox 2010), and the growing academic body of literature investigating the connections between media technologies and young peoples' civic participation (Bennett 2008; Cohen and Kahne 2012; Coleman 2007; Loader 2007).

This research investigates youth filmmaking, although there are inevitably parallels in other forms of community arts and media projects (Crehan 2011). Based on my research, I noted some of the unique facets of filmmaking, including the ways in which filmmaking inevitably requires engaging with both image and sound, and the use of a host of technologies (camera, computer editing) that incorporate both 'soft' social and 'hard' technical skills (Buckingham, et al. 1995; Goodman 2003). Youth filmmaking, as an organized educational intervention requires engaging in a collaborative relationship with adults (Soep and Chávez 2010) as well as, most commonly, talking with people of all ages while on location.

As Terence Turner describes, filmmaking mediates 'a variety of social and political relationships' (1992: 7) both in the act of creation and in the circulation of representations. In this sense, filmmaking is both a 'process' and a 'product' – encompassing both the making of the artifact and the pathways that the artifact

might travel once it comes into being (Harvey, et al. 2002). For the purposes of this article, I primarily concern myself with the processual acts of creating a film, rather than analyzing the final texts, although these will be briefly described. In the case of *The River* project analyzing the final films alone would reveal little about the ways in which young people used the process of filmmaking as a means to engage with minute and little-noticed aspects of known and unknown places, as a form of 'place-making.' Thus, youth filmmaking here is defined not only by the creation of a film, but through the relationships and corporeal experiences that are invoked within the process of bring the film to life.

Methodology

In order to explore the practice of youth filmmaking, I conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with participatory film projects in London over a period of two years. I identified these case studies through a range of methods, including my previous professional networks. I contacted youth media organizations based on recent funding announcements, through referrals from other organizations and practitioners, and via professional associations and youth sector publications. My research comprised interviews with individuals from over thirty different youth media organizations and the creation of eleven in-depth case studies based on film projects which varied in length from intensive workshops over the course of a few weeks to longer-term engagements which met sometimes sporadically over a period of months.

Some initiatives targeted youth groups based on specific age categories, and others were 'open access' and therefore more heterogeneous. Overall, the young participants ranged from approximately twelve to nineteen years old and came from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, although many were described in project reports as 'disadvantaged' based on geographic, economic, ethnic or other 'marginal' status. While some of the projects took place in school buildings, none were curricular-based initiatives (or received statutory funding), and all emphasized technical skills rather than asking young people simply to write scripts or appear in front of the camera.

In each case study, I conducted participant-observation throughout the filmmaking process and also held more in-depth semi-structured and informal focus groups and interviews with both young people and facilitators periodically throughout and sometimes after the projects. In select instances, I used photographs taken during production as the basis for follow-up interviews (Harper 2002).

In my broader research, I found that youth filmmaking was justified along several overlapping discursive agendas. In one form or another, these discourses could all be seen as attempts at intervening in young peoples 'citizenship practice' or 'citizenship feeling' (Lister, et al. 2005; Osler and Starkey 2005). In terms of place-making, youth filmmaking was seen as a way to foster a 'sense of "belonging" [as] a prerequisite to citizenship' (Weller 2007: 38) both in relation to physical and

metaphorical spaces. Before turning to academic theory that contextualizes ‘place-making’ as an embodied sensorial practice, I suggest briefly why I think understanding participatory filmmaking as a form of ‘place-making’ has specific methodological implications for visual anthropologists.

Although I employed some limited participatory visual methodologies, as alluded to above, in my own research I prioritized more ‘traditional’ ethnographic methods because I was interested in studying the cultural production of participatory video. Had I used participatory visual methods to study this process, I would have added an unnecessary and complicated filter of remove from the research. However, there are clear parallels between this research and the use of participatory visual methods within anthropology.

As recent writing on ‘photovoice’ (Johnson 2011) attests, participatory visual research can enable children and young people to reflect on their lives by using mechanisms that attempt to foreground their agency and experience. Sarah Pink’s work on ‘applied visual anthropology’ (Pink 2007a) demonstrates the ways in which participatory video can help to ameliorate some concerns over power and representation. However this research often concentrates largely on the technical and relational aspects of participatory video, considering how these techniques might mitigate (or exacerbate) existing inequalities (see also Flores 2004).

This case study adds to this discussion by explicating the phenomenological process instigated by filmmaking, particularly for urban young people, and by focusing specific attention on what this means for investigations of place. In the next section, I draw on an existing body of anthropological and social geographical literature that seeks to understand the ways in which ‘space’ becomes ‘place’ through lived experience. Participatory filmmaking is but one method through which we can mediate this process, but as I describe below, it can be a unique one.

(INSERT FIG. 2)

Understanding place-making

In the past two decades, social scientists increasingly have turned their attention to the ways in which labile ‘spaces’ are transformed into specified, socialized and personalized ‘places’ from which individual and collective affiliations are drawn (Tilley 1994). This process often is heavily contested (Humphrey 2001; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003) and may encompass invisible struggles for power and position and visible control of not only the built environment but also who is allowed to access it (Massey 1998).

Much of the literature on ‘place’ draws on a phenomenological approach, where being ‘in place’ is understood to be an essentially embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962) in which one’s own sensual presence is interwoven with the exigencies of both physical location and temporal and human relationships (Feld and Basso

1996). From an awareness of a single foreground sound emerging from a background cacophony to the surprise of coming across a new urban vista, or the ways in which those who trace the same routes each day are only subconsciously aware of their own processes of looking (Ingold and Vergunst 2008), place-making requires engaging in a 'doubly reciprocal motion: as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place' (Feld 1996: 91). Mitigated by our senses, the experience of place is akin to a form of 'storytelling,' in which our experiences of places are enacted and re-enacted through 'temporality and remembrance,' (Tilley 1994: 34) concepts which are inherently mutable and 'always under construction... a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey 2005: 9).

Accepting that places are 'made' not only through their physical manifestations but also via the relationships they contain and the embodied storytelling practices they enable, filmmaking can be seen as a specific intervention into the experience of being 'in place.' As Pink (Pink 2006; 2007b) asserts, filmmaking provides a heightened sensorial engagement with the world, mediated through the use of technology. In choosing where to direct the camera's gaze, the filmmaker 'focuses' on one aspect of the scene, framing an element by separating it from the background world around it 'in order to look at it more closely, as we might pick up a leaf in the forest' (MacDougall 2006: 4).

For young filmmakers, the act of using a professional-grade camera for the first time and experiencing the ways in which the technology mediates the world can make a powerful impression. Within the context of the non-formal educational filmmaking projects I studied, the experience of filmmaking as a form of place-making can be understood within the wider project of youth intervention. Across many of these initiatives, place emerged as a key justification for intervention. Here, I suggest a typology for considering how place – as both a physical and a temporal construct – emerged throughout the diversity of the researched youth filmmaking projects.

Youth filmmaking and 'belonging'

For youth filmmaking, as in other social interventions aimed at young people, 'belonging' often is both an implicit and explicit objective. In the context of the UK, 'belonging' has been taken up as a central policy objective. From the communitarian rhetoric popular under the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 (Driver and Martell 1997) to the idea of the 'Big Society' espoused by the Coalition Government from 2010 to the present (Jordan 2011), the idea that physical communities would become a space of 'affirmation' or a 'moral field binding persons into durable relations' (Rose 1999: 172) has been an enduring and powerful political narrative.ⁱⁱ

Spatially inscribed places, and the communities they are perceived as containing, often are seen as a locus for the 'practice' of citizenship (Osler and Starkey 2005). In the Crick Report, the influential youth citizenship report which led to the advent of the national Citizenship Curriculum, the authors note that before young people can be 'practicing citizens' 'they need to have a sense of *belonging* – of *identity* – with the

community around them' (my emphasis Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998: 61). This is described as universally true, but has special resonance in the case of groups of young people from urban areas noted for high levels of place-based 'gangs' or those from largely immigrant backgrounds, as in the case study under consideration here.

Conversely, there are also ways in which young peoples' presence in or sense of ownership over physical places is seen as problematic in public discourse. Mainstream British media imagery of young people most often depicts young people in terms of violence and delinquency (Andrews 2008; YouthNet/British Youth Council 2006). Some of the research studies of the past forty years provide empirical evidence for the idea that young peoples' occupation of space is often pathologized as destructive by their older neighbors (Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Corrigan 1979; Nayak 2003). Concerns regarding young peoples' occupation of public space reached a fever pitch in recent years when the popular press disseminated a narrative of 'feral youth' (Narey 2008) engaging in 'epidemic' levels of violence (The Independent 2006). Arguably the apex of this characterization was the coverage of the 2011 riots in London and Birmingham (Cottle 2012) during which young people were seen, alternatively, as the cause or symptom of wider social ills and as the subject of increasing fear and suspicion.

To interpret this, recent public policy literature has pointed to concerns over 'problematic territoriality' – that is, situations where young people's sense of belonging in certain minutely defined places is understood as being, at best, limiting or, at worst, violent (Kintrea, et al. 2008). This 2008 study surveyed young people and found that some described a deeply limited sense of 'place-attachment,' in which very small geographic areas were considered 'safe' bounded areas in which to move freely, while resources, even just across the road, were perceived to be sites of physical danger. This view was echoed in the explorations of 'post-code gangs' (youth 'gangs' associated with a specific geographic area corresponding to UK postal codes) in several of the youth-produced films I studied throughout my fieldwork (Gidley 2007).

In the context of youth filmmaking, these discussions are not academic ones. Funded by public sources, many of these projects received direct or indirect funding based on or sometimes tailored to broader policy interests in intervening in young peoples' spatial practices. From initiatives exploring a single housing estate to those which engaged young people in projecting a familiar place into an unknown future, these projects had both a circumscribed spatial dimension (physically filming 'on location') as well as a temporal dimension – either looking at a neighborhood as it currently was or investigating changes in localities over time. The idea that youth media production enables this form of exploration of place is an emerging research theme and is examined in contexts ranging from the experience of young Native American filmmakers (Gibbons, et al. 2011) to young global immigrants (Buckingham and de Block 2007).

Analyzing my fieldwork as a whole, I suggest the following flexible categories to organize the ways in which place emerged as an ambition within youth filmmaking. While these categories are useful as a heuristic device, many of the projects I studied, including the films from *The River*, described below, overlap among these categories. First, some projects aimed at exploring *familiar places*, sometimes intensively so. One example is the project run by *Roaring Voices*ⁱⁱⁱ in which young people explored the minute physicality of their own housing estate and narrated for the viewer their favorite bits of graffiti or the low wall where they liked to hang out.

Second, some projects sought to bring young people into *unfamiliar places*, new areas they had not yet explored or may have been too intimidated to access. One example was a youth produced ethnographic film project in South London, in which a group of young people made a documentary about a local street populated mainly by Somali immigrants that some of the non-Somali students had not felt confident frequenting. The students conducted initial fieldwork to meet young people who used the street and then documented the commercial, social and cultural aspects of the street.

In the third category I include projects that explored *places of the past* or the historical debates and legacies that influenced how the communities they knew had come into being. For instance, young people making a historical documentary in Brixton interviewed local market traders and workers at the cinema about their 'favorite memories of Brixton,' including references to the 1981 riot and more recent gentrification.

In the final category, some projects consciously considered *places of the future*. These included planning and consultative projects in which young people were asked to imagine how the familiar places they inhabit could be altered in the context of regeneration or renewal projects. For instance, a large organization focusing on the construction of a new high-rise office building funded a participatory youth film project to garner the input of local young people into how the spaces surrounding the building might be used.

In this article, I describe the process of making two films from a series called *The River*, which embodied several of the categories listed above. In three ways – by focusing in on both familiar and unfamiliar places and by engaging with how the lives of residents in the post-industrial area in East London in advance of its transformation by the Olympics construction – the young local participants were invited to consciously articulate their understandings of place.

The River

Joseph, an experienced filmmaker-facilitator, initiated *The River* project in the spring of 2007. To fund *The River*, Joseph had applied and then re-applied to one of the main central-government sources for youth film and supplemented the budget with resources from the local government 'renewal fund.' He proposed to work with

young people to make a series of films about the Lea River Valley, the area that runs from Hertfordshire to the Thames, terminating at Leamouth near Canary Wharf, surrounding the River Lea. It also is known for its rich industrial history, and for the imminent social changes to be brought about by the Olympics (Gold and Gold 2008). The concept of a region poised at the edge of change was explicitly to be the central theme of the films.

Joseph established a relationship with Maria, a teacher from Lea School, a local secondary school. Lea School is a large East London state school with a diverse student population and is located near a busy market populated mainly by the local Bangladeshi community. Joseph described his facilitation style as 'process-led but product-driven.' He felt that in all of the films he facilitated, the young people should be proud of what they created and not create films that look 'like crap on screen'.^{iv} Joseph emphasized the interconnection between an aesthetic appreciation of the world around you and the process of 'place-making.' He saw his role as a filmmaker as a process of 'helping [the young people] see the beauty in the world around his student-participants – those little glimpses of sublime beauty which might not otherwise be accessed but which are really inspiring.'

In total, Joseph's company, *Flowering Minds*, made four documentary short films with young people about the Lea Valley, two of which I followed from initial set-up to completion. While the two films shared the theme of exploring the area of the river and had the same basic educational context and ambition, they differed in terms of orientation and content, as described below.

Pre-production

The students who took part in the project either came from the 'Gifted and Talented' program at Lea School or had been hand-selected by Maria as a reward for recent hard work or for extra social support (for instance, one student was a recent immigrant from the Sudan; another had been badly bullied because of his weight). The filming of both projects took place over several months, occasionally during school hours but most intensively during the school breaks. Notably, the students on both films came from largely first and second-generation immigrant backgrounds. Of the total of sixteen young people who took part in the project, only two identified as 'British' (one girl identifying as 'White British' and the other as 'mixed-race: Afro-Caribbean/White'^v) whereas the others were largely from second-generation Bangladeshi families, as well as a small number of more recent arrivals from the Sudan, Nigeria and China.

Of the young people who took part in the films, some stayed more involved than others over the life of the project. The students used a professional grade Sony camera with a number of manual settings, which Joseph explained to the group. He also demonstrated how to set up and take down a tripod. Before going into the field, Joseph instructed the students in the techniques of using the camera (including how to load the tapes, set exposure etc.) and the names of different kinds of shots and

camera movements. He also taught them how to use the sound recording devices, a boom microphone on a boom pole attached to a separate sound recorder. That the film would be a documentary was appealing to some participants. For example, one participant called Jana told me that she liked 'true films [that] could really happen, not something as imagined but something that could happen in the real world.'

At school the young people researched the history of the Lea Valley and decided on shooting locations with guidance from Joseph and his co-facilitator Victor. The young people were aware that the timing of the project – just prior to the start of the Olympics construction – was meaningful. One participant, Melanie, articulated this by saying that she felt it was 'important to remember the past' because with the 'Olympics everything is going to change.' Though the young people were familiar with the concept of the Olympics, none had a clear sense of where the stadiums were going to be constructed or how the changes might affect their lives.

Joseph's own description of the project was that the young people would act as a team of quasi 'salvage' anthropologists, recording the area in transition. At the start of the project, he told the group, 'one person's wasteland is another person's community... The things that we're going to film will never be there again.' Some of the participants, particularly those who eventually filmed in the nature reserve, shared the critique of the destructive nature of Olympic building. When I asked one young man what he would make a film about if he could film anything, he responded, 'I would want to make a film about the Olympics and like how most of the stuff is going to be going due to the Olympics and after the Olympics is over it's just gone... all this hassle just for two months of sport and afterwards they're going to sell it.'^{vi} Although the theme and funding for the project were pre-established, these comments from the young people indicated that they were already engaged with the debates around the places and spaces of East London, and had been in some ways motivated to join the project due to these interests.

The 'places,' both inhabited and invoked by the young filmmakers who participated in *The River*, therefore encompassed both local and global scales. Most of the participants lived near the school, and with one or two exceptions, most had never been to the neighboring borough where some of the filming took place, and certainly had not visited the Olympics site. Though the locations ranged from a few yards to a few miles from the school, accessing them required multiple forms of public transportation. The areas around both the school and the nature reserve were also themselves examples of both global and local flows. The boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney (where the school was located and where some of the filming took place) have been characterized by long histories of migration, first by Huguenot, Jewish, Polish and Russian settlers and later by Bangladeshi migrants, and in Hackney by Caribbean and later Turkish and Kurdish migrants, amongst others (Eade 1989; Gardner 2002).

At one point, Maria told me that she ascribed to some of the young people a 'village mentality' since they rarely went outside of their immediate area. At another

fieldsite, a facilitator described the young people as being ‘territorial animals’ and that the challenge of accessing new spaces, even a less than a mile away, was intimidating. Adults and young people understood this circumscribed spatial field in London as having multiple explanations. For example, concerns over safety (both the young people’s fears for their own safety in unfamiliar environments as well as prohibitions enforced by parents) predominated as well as a lack of awareness or skills (i.e. forms of ‘cultural capital’) they perceived were required to seek out opportunities or adventures in other parts of London. There were some differences between the Bangladeshi students and the non-Bangladeshi students in this regard. The non-Bangladeshi students, as a whole, lived slightly farther from the school and as such had more experience of moving through different London neighborhoods, whereas the Bangladeshi students by and large stuck more closely to the immediate surrounds of Lea School.

Yet this relatively circumscribed zone of comfort within London contrasted with the intensely global movements many of the young people undertook during the school breaks, and certainly with the global scale of the Olympics themselves. While the young people might have inhabited only a few square blocks of East London, several of the young people traveled thousands of miles to visit family between school sessions. At one point during filming, Sirraaj, one of the participants, identified a strange-looking tree growing in the nature reserve. He knew this tree, he reported (and the ranger confirmed) because it was similar in shape to one that grew in the region where his family lived in Syllhet, Bangladesh.
(INSERT FIG. 3)

On Location

Once the locations had been selected, the teams went to film at different sites in the Lea Valley. For the film ‘Nature,’ shooting occurred mainly at the Middlesex Filter Beds Nature Reserve near Hackney Marshes. Unusually within the context of youth filmmaking, during *The River* project, the facilitators chose to separate the audio and visual recordings. Breaking into small teams, two to three young people would be responsible either for recording interviews or ‘wild tracks’ with the boom-mounted microphone or working with the camera to record the visuals. As the participants stood in the fields or by the mouth of the river and recorded simple sounds, they had an unusually immersive experience.

As I, alongside the young sound recorders, stood still, concentrated, and tried not to laugh or move to obtain the ‘wild tracks,’ it repeatedly struck me how rare this action (or in-action) felt. Simultaneously, it was silent in comparison with the hectic market near the school and the school itself, and yet it was rich with a very different kind of sound – the faint sound of cars passing on the road nearby, birds chirping in the trees, the sound of the river gurgling, of the talking of other students filming nearby, and even the bees buzzing as they pollinated flowers. When later replaying my own sound recordings from this fieldwork session, I came across the following exchange: when I asked one of the young men what he thought of recording the

sound, he replied almost rapturously, 'I think it's a really nice job because we get to explore all around the park and we get to see different animals... Look, look! [Pointing to a butterfly] it's sucking the nectar, look! Let's follow it! Look, there are raspberries!'

(INSERT FIG. 4)

Having walked with the same group of men through the same field both before and after the sound recording, I noticed a distinct and dramatic difference. Through filtering their experience of the world through the process of recording, the young people were invited to inhabit their surroundings in a new and different way. By recording, which had required standing stock-still in a field with arms aloft, they suddenly noticed the smallest of changes in their environment. This was not only auditory but also visual. In the case of the camerawork, the young people operating the camera specifically noted the need to pay attention to their physical movements and how these movements affected the camera. When I asked two of the young men, 'what do you think of the filming?' they responded:

Kabir: Its fun and peaceful kind of work, it's a nice job.

Ahmad: It's tricky because you have to move it [the camera] slowly and then stop.

Kabir: You have to rehearse a lot as well.

ABR: Is it different to how you thought it would be?

Kabir: Yeah, I thought you would just record straightaway but you have to rehearse it before you record.

Ahmad: [Talking about the sound recorder] you just close your eyes and put your ears out and listen to things you might not have even heard in your life before.

This exchange highlights the awareness that the young people themselves had of the process of filmmaking. They were able to reflect on the speed of the process (slower than expected) and on how their sensory capacities were invoked in filming and recording sound. In part, this was enabled by being in an unfamiliar landscape, where the act of moving around the nature reserve required a more concentrated form of engagement than the almost-automatic process of inhabiting their more familiar local area.

As part of the process of creating the films in *The River* series, therefore, the young participants had to engage in a process of minute concentration on audio and visual registers as well as maintain an awareness of their own physical presence. By singling out a specific motif to film or record, the young people were required physically to manipulate the technology (in selecting a shot or recording a specific sound) as well as focus their own perceptive capacities.^{vii} This is an embodied process, requiring one to experience directed vision, mediated by a camera lens, and a heightened ability to listen attentively. This process mirrors the wider understandings of place-making as a phenomenological activity, described above,

and reminds us that this sensorial activity also inherently mirrors the formation of a narrative.

When Joseph, the lead facilitator, asked the young people to tell the 'story' of the river, he unknowingly echoed anthropological understandings of place-making as intrinsically embedded within narrative. For instance, Tim Ingold writes about how, 'a person who can 'tell' is one who is perceptually attuned to picking up information in the environment that others, less skilled in the tasks of perception, might miss' (Ingold 2000: 190). By focusing on 'symbolic reference points' in the landscape (Basso 1996), the facilitators' intention was for young people to gain a sense of familiarity with and ownership over these newly inscribed places.

The fact that the young people were from largely immigrant backgrounds, and were filming in locations that were themselves reflective not only of long histories of migration but also of contemporary global flows, also impacted subtly on the experience of filming. For instance, in Siraaj's comparison of filming a close-up of a particular tree (described above) he referenced an emotionally resonant location many thousands of miles away. Yet while the young people drew on individual personal geographies of movement as background to their interactions with the places and spaces they inhabited during *The River*, the topics covered by the two films avoided direct interrogation of current politics of migration in the area. One of the films, *Nature* (described below), was relatively ahistorical in its treatment of the site in the local nature reserve, while *Remember* dealt more explicitly with the politics of the area. However the ultimate theme of the film was past migration, and was not directly linked to the current experience of any of the young people as immigrants themselves. These links were made tangentially by the young people, as in Siraaj's comment, but were not a major focus of the project.

Post-production

Once the shooting had been completed, the students returned to school and, a few weeks later, gathered to review the material they had filmed and start to assemble a rough edit. While several of the students described watching the footage as 'boring,' a small handful participated very actively in the editing. Joseph and Victor had brought two laptops to the school, so in groups of three and four, the students created a loose rough edit using Final Cut Pro, a software program that the facilitators had trained them to use, albeit cursorily. When I asked several students what they thought of the editing, one participant told me that he had found it quite 'tough' with 'so many buttons.' Another complained that 'we didn't know [what we were doing] because it was the first time we edited the thing, edited a movie.'

The editing process involved re-visiting the locations that had been experienced for the first time during filming. In each instance digitizing and logging the footage was met with a series of reminiscences and recollections, about the people encountered or funny things that had happened amongst the group-members. Though the degree of attention drifted, the young people came up with a basic timeline of the scenes

and shots to be included, although the facilitators later largely re-cut and touched up the films, adding music and inter-titles for which the students had made suggestions. The fact that the facilitators had re-edited the films was also not lost on the participants. Melanie, one of the young filmmakers who worked on 'Remember' noted that Joseph and Victor had 'chucked' some of the sequencing they had done, and 'changed the order of it.'

Although the ethos of the film had been relatively participatory, the final films reflected, in part, the young peoples' creative choices but clearly those of the adult facilitators as well. As I discuss elsewhere (Blum-Ross 2012) this result reflected Joseph and Victor's facilitation style which emphasized an 'apprenticeship' oriented approach. In this sense, the young people retained authorship over the film, but Joseph and Victor also asserted their expertise as experienced filmmakers in directing much of the filming and in re-editing the very rough first cuts produced by the young people.

Nevertheless, after several months, the films were shown at a screening at a local cinema. When I spoke with the participants afterwards about how it had felt to watch their own films, Zak told me 'I think our one was better [than the other film]' and proceeded to list for me the different shots he'd taken that had made it into the final film.

The screening itself was fairly quiet, attracting a mixed audience of students from other schools and film-interested contacts of Joseph and Victor's. The audience responded volubly with cheers and by clapping to both the locations covered, and to the fact that the films had been youth-produced. Maria, the lead teacher, later reported to me that while she felt that the facilitators could have done more to involve the young people in presenting the films at the screening, she felt the films themselves were 'gorgeous, I loved them.' She sent home copies of the DVDs to the young people's parents, along with a certificate of completion.

An assessment as to whether the process of taking part in making *The River* will have a long term impact on the young participants' experience of place is impossible, at this stage, it would require a longitudinal study beyond the scope of this research. However in interviews I conducted immediately following the project's end, two sentiments predominated: a change in how the young people perceived their neighborhood and a greater awareness of their own sensorial process of being in the world. In a post-project interview, Jana told me that she'd enjoyed 'seeing the different places where things happened and seeing the difference between the past and the present... how the attitudes towards people [had changed]' and how she now felt a bit different about her neighborhood, commenting that '[the people] help each other from young to old, they help the neighborhood in a way that they treat people like their own member of a family.'

The process of embodied place-making through film was not an abstract concept but one that several of the young people consciously articulated. For example, Zak

explained how he had 'liked focusing your ears to find the sounds' and Sirraaj talked about 'not just recording anything, but recording a nice shot.' Zahira, who, at times, had expressed frustration with the project and often was reluctant to join in, most poetically described the idea that the young people would use their sensory capacity to experience the world in new ways. At the end of the project, I asked her to reflect on what she had thought of the filming process, and she said 'you know with this film, it made our eyes get a bit bigger, like we can see things a bit more.'

The Films

The first film, entitled 'Remember' was a historical documentary shot at different locations throughout the Lea River Valley. The film begins with shots of half-submerged tires sticking up out of a muddy river bottom. The sound recordings from an interview shot with a man, who runs inflatable boat tours in East London, serves as the voice-over for the film, and gives it historical context. The voice-over is accompanied by a series of still shots of different areas along the riverbed and surrounding valley. A series of different interviews are cut together, including historical narratives of a local strike of match-factory workers, some references to the immigrant history of the area and the founding of the West Ham football team. At the end of the film, over shots of boats driving down the river, the first interviewee asks, 'You want more stories? About the river? Well, I've met you two today haven't I, now you're part of history aren't you?'

(Fig. 5 – Film Stills of 'Remember')

The second film was entitled 'Nature' and was filmed in a single location – the Middlesex Filter Beds nature reserve in the Lea Valley. Instead of investigating the area through time, Nature is an in-depth look at the flora and fauna of the river, set to a series of poems from creation myths and stories from different religions and cultures. The first shots are extreme close ups of the river, with algae and bubbles floating on the surface as more inter-titles from creation myths and stories are shown, and the animals shown increase in biological complexity. There are no voice-overs as each of the selected shots show relationships either between the animals and each other (i.e. horses nuzzling each other) or the animals and their surroundings. The final sequence cross-cuts between shots of a cormorant, sunning itself with wings outstretched on a pipe, and a bulldozer with a bird-like digging arm sweeping away earth and a large tree.

(Fig. 6 – Film Stills of 'Nature')

As is visible in the screenshots of the two films described above, the aesthetic of the two films from *The River* represents an almost forensic sensory concentration on minute visual and auditory motifs. The attention to small pieces of evidence of and in the surroundings – a shopping cart half submerged in mud, a decaying chrysalis on a branch, the disembodied call of a magpie – were visual and auditory

manifestations of Victor's desire that the project help the participants 'see the world afresh... [to look] at things they wouldn't normally see.'

Victor's statement underscores that, for both facilitators, the idea of using the specific technical, creative and social affordances of filmmaking as a means of creating a new experience of being 'in place' was an explicit aim of the project. Joseph told the young people that he wanted them to use the recording technologies in order to uncover the 'story' of the river. Rather than simply experiencing the space through their own natural sensory capacity, they were directed to use the camera and sound recorders to engage this 'place' with the heightened perception that, he believed, this equipment provides.

Conclusion

Zahira's statement, above, that filmmaking allowed the participants to 'see things a bit more' acknowledges her experience of filmmaking as a means of understanding 'place' in fresh and different ways. Her comment mirrored my own observation that the filmic technologies (both auditory and visual) allowed for an innovative form of understanding and inhabitation. In speaking of her eyes getting 'bigger,' Zahira expressed the concept that, by concentrating more fully and completely on previously unnoticed spaces, filming created a more expansive experience of the space and place themselves. Equally, by foregrounding the embodied practice of filmmaking in her metaphor of physical change and growth, Zahira underscores Jean Rouch's understanding of filmmaking as a series of performative immersive physical experiences (Castaing-Taylor 1994; Henley 2009).

The conscious prioritizing of 'place-making' in youth filmmaking is not a casual act but rather a conscious intervention. In relationship to the wider concerns about young people's spatial practices, as described above, the idea of *encouraging* young people's sense of belonging is an inherently ideological project. An intervention that so prominently describes itself as inviting young people to feel a 'positive' sense of belonging to and ownership over the world around them must be understood in light of simultaneous contemporary understandings in which youthful 'sense of ownership' over public space is viewed negatively. Projects such as *The River* did not seek to work with young people because the facilitators were attempting to address explicitly the repercussions of young people's 'problematic territoriality;' rather the organizers of the project wanted to introduce young people to new places and to increase a sense of 'pride, creating a local sense of belonging and place attachment' (Kintrea, et al. 2008: 13).

The organizers of *The River* project saw filmmaking as a way of empowering young people through enabling them to 'define their surroundings' (Breitbart 1998). Yet in a sense this type of project has its own form of hegemony – both in the ways in which the young people were invited to mirror the facilitators own understandings of the world as well as in the origin of the project as a state-supported initiative. There is a form of 'governmentality' (Rose 1999) being subtly articulated – wherein

a particular 'regime of truth' is being devised and exercised through privileging one form of intervention over another (19). As discussed above, 'belonging' itself had already formed a central part of the state project of encouraging young people to feel involved in their communities as 'citizens.' Thus, while projects such as *The River* describe themselves as a form of 'positive' intervention, they reflect a specific state-approved version of belonging, wherein young people are encouraged to experience a 'sense of ownership' but not to become *over*-attached.

Similarly, the use of film to concentrate on some aspects of place, but not others, carries inherent contradictions. By inviting young people to use the medium of filmmaking to attune their perceptive abilities to understand, learn about and express feelings about familiar places, unfamiliar places, places of the past and places of the future, inevitably filmmaking projects at once both highlight and exclude aspects of experience. Therefore, filmmaking as a heightened form of 'place-making' is simultaneously an effort at a more profound way of engaging with place and an inherently partial way of interacting with it.

Although much of the academic literature on place studies the implicit and often unnoticed ways in which people 'make places,' in this study, I have chosen to highlight an instance where place-making, in differing ways, was both an implicit and explicit aim of the youth filmmaking project. By detailing the number of ways in which place is consciously articulated as an ambition driving youth filmmaking initiatives, I have attempted to demonstrate that filmmaking affords new and unique ways for young people to arbitrate their experiences of place using both technology and their own perceptual abilities.

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ⁱ I use the term 'filmmaking' throughout this article even though the actual technology used in my case studies was digital *video* recording rather than 35mm (or 8mm or 16mm) film stock. 'Filmmaking' is used as shorthand for moving-image recording because the process of making a film is not only a technical competence (as in the ability to splice pieces of film together) but also a process of storytelling and interpretation that is mediated by technology. To use the term 'videomaking' over 'filmmaking' seems an unnecessary privileging of technology over a wider creative process, of which equipment is but one aspect.

ⁱⁱ Implicitly or explicitly, much of the discourse of 'belonging' references the ideas of 'social capital' popularized by Putnam (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ All names are anonymized, except where the organization has specifically requested the use of its name. All individual names of young people and adult facilitators also have been anonymized. In the case of organizational or film names, I have attempted to create pseudonyms which are similar in tone to the actual title, where possible

^{iv} Because of Joseph's drive to accomplish a certain level of aesthetic achievement, Joseph depicted his pedagogical style as more consciously interventionist than some of the facilitators of other more

process-driven projects I studied. In my research I typify Joseph's style as an 'apprenticeship' style of teaching, which values filmic construction and aesthetic values and explicitly strives to enable young people to produce 'good' films that might reach an audience through film festivals or other dissemination means.

^v These categories were taken from the official monitoring documents required by the project funder.

^{vi} The feelings of local residents confronting the Olympic construction is explored visually in recent works by Chila (2012) and Kennelly & Watt (2012).

^{vii} The term 'focus' is also used in therapeutic and youth work, for instance where the idea of a 'focusing exercise' is meant to catalyze attention and bring a group together to facilitate concentration on a particular task (Colucci 2007).