

Black Victorians, British television drama and the 1978 adaptation of David Garnett's *The Sailor's Return*

Rachel Carroll

Abstract

The under-representation of black British history in British film and television drama has attracted significant public debate in recent years. In this context, this article revisits a critically overlooked British film featuring a woman of African origin as a protagonist in a drama set in Victorian England. *The Sailor's Return* (1978), directed by Jack Gold, is also a literary adaptation of a historical fiction written by David Garnett and first published in 1925. This article aims to situate the novel and its adaptation in three important contexts; set in rural Dorset in 1858, the narrative can be considered in the context of Victorian attitudes to people of African origin; written by a member of the Bloomsbury circle, the novel is informed by modernist perspectives on the legacies of the Victorian era; broadcast to a popular audience in the late 1970s, the film can be located in a politically progressive tradition of British television drama. Approached in this way, this multiply mediated cultural representation serves to generate insights into the treatment of racism in liberal left cultural production, from early twentieth century modernist milieu to the anti-racism of the British left in the 1970s. These contexts will inform close textual analysis of two motifs - the depiction of the countryside and the role of costume - which have proved central to ongoing debates about racialised constructions of national identity in British historical film genres. This article will argue that the 1978 film adaptation of *The Sailors Return* presents a significant precedent when considering what Stephen Bourne (2002) has termed the 'invisibility' of black British history in British historical film.

Keywords: Black Victorian; literary adaptation; film and television drama; anti-racism; 1970s Britain; countryside; costume.

In her 1995 essay, “Environmental Images and Imaginary Landscapes,” Lola Young writes that: “Finding a black person in an historical setting outside of images of slavery is still unusual. The long history of black people’s presence in Britain is most frequently ignored in favour of the myth that black people first came here in the 1950s” (104). Current debates about the under-representation of Black British people in British film and television drama, and especially in historical film and period drama, would suggest that Young’s words remain just as pertinent over twenty years later. Prestigious and popular genres of film and television drama – including literary adaptation and costume drama – continue to be almost exclusively white, denying the historical contribution of Black British people to British history and depriving non white actors of creative opportunities; leading Black British actors and performers, including David Harewood, Lenny Henry, Paterson Joseph and David Oyelowo, have challenged the under-representation of Black British actors on British screens and recent years have seen the launch of significant industry initiatives to address questions of diversity.¹ Young’s assertion was made in the context of a discussion of the work of Black British artist Ingrid Pollard, whose photographic series *Pastoral Interlude* (1988) explores the effect of “inserting black people into what have hitherto been portrayed as quintessentially ‘white’ English landscapes where they become immediately visible ‘outsiders’” (102). Indeed, Young observes that the “placing of a black man in a nineteenth-century industrialized setting is just as unsettling as the image of the black person in the countryside: ‘they’ don’t ‘belong’ in these contexts” (104). The Victorian era and the English countryside are the exact location for the action of *The Sailor’s Return* (UK, Dir. Jack Gold, Screenplay James Saunders, 1978), a British film drama which depicts the fortunes of an African born woman married to a white English sailor as they seek to make a home and living in a village in mid-Victorian Dorset. A British period drama, directed by Jack Gold, *The Sailor’s Return* is also an adaptation of a literary historical fiction, David Garnett’s 1925 novel of the same title. Garnett’s *The Sailor’s Return* is notable in giving a sympathetic narrative voice, complex personal history and nuanced characterisation to a Victorian woman of African origin. Indeed, in the introduction to the 2011 Sundial Press edition of Garnett’s novel, J. Lawrence Mitchell suggests that *The Sailor’s Return* “may have the distinction of being the first modern British novel with a black heroine” (Garnett,

2011: iii). Broadcast at the latter end of the “golden age” of British television drama, *The Sailor’s Return* has received limited scholarly attention, with the notable exception of Stephen Bourne’s important essay, “Secrets and Lies: Black British histories and British Historical Films” (2002) in which he examines the “invisibility” of black history in British historical film genres, including literary adaptation, and suggests that “whiteness” has come to serve as an unspoken generic signifier. Following from Bourne’s lead, this article proceeds from the premise that the under-representation of Black British people in British historical film has important implications for contemporary debates about British history, identity and cultural representation. I wish to suggest that this powerful and critically overlooked 1978 film adaptation offers valuable opportunities to reflect on the mediation of the past in multiple historical and cultural contexts, from Victorian England, to the early twentieth century and to the late 1970s and beyond. Predating the emergence of the heritage film in the 1980s, with its nostalgic commodification of versions of Englishness closely associated with class, gender and colonial privilege, *The Sailor’s Return* presents an important historical precedent when thinking about historical film genres. Moreover, reflection on the novel and its adaptation has the potential to provide insights into a history of the treatment of racism in white liberal left cultural production, from the modernist ironies of the Bloomsbury group, with its satirical depiction of its imperial forebears, to the progressive British television drama of the post Second World War decades, with its focus on class politics. This article aims to demonstrate how these contexts can serve to provide a critical framework for an appreciation of the significance of this film, both in its own context and today. It will begin by situating Garnett’s 1925 novel and its depiction of an African born woman in two contexts: the Victorian context of its setting and the modernist context of its production. It will then turn to the 1978 film adaptation with a focus on two further contexts of production: the progressive politics of a tradition of British television drama and the anti-racism of the British liberal left. These contexts will inform close analysis of selected scenes from the film adaptation with a focus on two motifs. The English countryside has played a key role in constructions of national identity in historical film and costume has assumed a central place in the heritage aesthetic which came to dominate period drama (including literary adaptation) in the years following the film’s release.² My analysis of the film adaptation will focus on these contested generic signifiers, examining the ways in which the film

challenges ideologies of the rural and exploring the role played by depictions of dress in a drama of cultural assimilation. The key concern of this article is to consider the potential contribution of *The Sailor's Return* to ongoing efforts to recover and represent Black British history, especially within the context of British historical film and literary adaptation genres; as such a critical appreciation of the ways in which this narrative is mediated by a variety of historical and cultural contexts is crucial.

Eminent Victorians: *The Sailor's Return* and Modernist Historical Fiction

David Garnett's *The Sailor's Return*, first published in 1925, offers a compelling evocation of the tensions between the rhythms of nineteenth century village life and the restless energies of the landlocked sailor. An English seafarer in the prime of life, William Targett disembarks at Southampton docks in 1858 with his wife Tulip, the daughter of the King of Dahomey in West Africa, and their young son Sambo. The couple assume the tenancy of the Sailor's Return, an inn in the fictionalized Dorset village of Maiden Newbarrow. The labourers' desire for refreshment prevails over initial suspicions about the new residents and Targett and Tulip work hard to win the working men's loyalties, transforming the neglected property into a convivial communal space. However, Targett's estranged sister Lucy is instrumental in fuelling local suspicion and hostility, under the guise of concerns about the legal and moral status of his marriage. When Targett becomes distracted by the lure of London and the races at nearby Goodwood the villagers take advantage of his increasingly prolonged absences, threatening to burn the inn – with Tulip and her young son inside – to the ground. When Targett dies as a result of foul play during an amateur boxing contest, Tulip flees the village with her son, justifiably fearing that her husband's family will deprive her of her child. Returning to Southampton, she is able to secure passage to West Africa for her son alone, entrusting him to an English captain with all her remaining wealth. A destitute Tulip returns to Maiden Newbarrow on foot and the new tenants of the Sailor's Return take her in as an unpaid servant, where she remains for the rest of her life.

Targett would not be the first Victorian mariner to return home with an African charge. In this same period two African children were brought to England where they enjoyed the philanthropic interest and royal patronage of Queen Victoria. Sarah Forbes Bonetta (1843-1880) was orphaned in

warfare and captured by slave raiders. Rescued by Captain Frederick E. Forbes she was given as a “gift” to Queen Victoria who raised her as a goddaughter. She was named after Forbes, who had been engaged in a mission to persuade the King of Dahomey to cease participation in the slave trade, and the *Bonetta*, a British vessel which served to enforce anti-slaving policy in the Atlantic. Prince Alemayou (1861-1879) was the son of an Ethiopian emperor whose father committed suicide following defeat by the British and whose mother died in captivity. Taken to England by Captain Tristram Speedy he was educated at Cheltenham and Sandhurst. He made a lasting impression when introduced to Queen Victoria and after his early death from pleurisy was buried at Windsor Castle, his grave stone bearing the legend: “I was a stranger and you took me in.” Records indicate that these young people were remarked upon for their intelligence, their receptivity to formal education and their aptitude in adopting English customs and manners. As children and as orphans they seem to have appealed to specific Victorian sentiments: the rescued girl slave and the exiled boy emperor, both grateful recipients of the Christian charity of their captors. It seems clear that both individuals were considered exceptional rather than representative, a combination of royal birth, imperial intervention and crown patronage combining to bestow class privileges in reward for cultural assimilation.

Historians of Black British history have done much to establish the long and diverse history of people of African origin on British and Irish soil prior to the mass migrations of the mid twentieth century, in studies including David Dabydeen’s *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (1985), Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984), C.L. Innes’s *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain* (2008), Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina’s *Black Victorians / Black Victoriana* (2003), Jeffrey Green’s *Black Edwardians: Black People in Britain 1901-1914* (1998) and Jan Marsh’s *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800-1900* (2005). However, as Kathryn Castle has observed, depictions of Africans in popular Victorian publications of the time combined to suggest that “[t]he African in England” was “an *aberration*, the occasional product of a seafaring nation’s links with the wider world” (2003: 155, emphasis added). Indeed, Julia Margaret Cameron’s striking photographic portraits of the Prince and his English captor / rescuer (with Speedy in African dress) may have contributed to this image of the African in England as an exotic, sentimental and essentially solitary figure, despite the longer history of people of African

origin in the British Isles, dating back to the Roman occupation and reaching a peak in the eighteenth century. The examples of Prince Alemayou and Sarah Forbes Bonetta illustrate the ways in which certain individuals attained an unusual if limited “visibility” as black Victorians, both in the historical record (through their association with Queen Victoria) and through visual culture (both were captured in photographic portraiture). The paradox of this visibility is that in emphasising their exceptional status – as remarkable “aberrations” – it may do little to contest the collective “invisibility” of British people of African origin.³ Whether Garnett’s African-born heroine was inspired by the life of a specific historical individual has yet to be determined; indeed, the author claimed in a letter to Lytton Strachey that the narrative was “drawn entirely from the imagination” (Knights, 2015: 202, emphasis in the original). However, the late Victorian sentiments and pieties seemingly at work in the representation of figures like Alemayou and Forbes Bonetta are arguably the object of satirical treatment in Garnett’s novel, especially in its depiction of Tulip’s fate at the hands of white charity.

Despite her royal ancestry, Tulip’s experience as a mature woman, wife and mother in *The Sailor’s Return* is very different to that of the young Prince. Indeed, her reception is perhaps more representative of a shift in attitudes in the course of the nineteenth century; where anti-abolition discourses in the earlier part of the nineteenth century had emphasized the common humanity of the enslaved African as a “man and a brother,” later Victorian discourses of Empire increasingly constructed the African as a racial “Other,” with individual Africans exhibited in Europe and America in travelling shows, circuses and ethnographic displays (see (Brantlinger, 1988; Stepan, 1982; Gikandi, 1996). Indeed, this practice extended well into the twentieth century with the publication of Garnett’s novel coinciding with the Great Empire Exhibition of 1924-5 at Wembley, where press coverage of the display of an African village attracted protests by West African students studying in London (Britton, 2010).⁴ In Garnett’s novel Tulip is initially mistaken for exotic property on her arrival in England, with rumours circulating that “the big stranger had left the sea in order to become a showman, and that Tulip and her baby and the parrot were the advance guard of his collection. Lions, hyaenas and other wild beasts were said to be on their way to Dorchester” (11). Nor is a fascination with the African elite much in evidence among the agricultural workers of Maiden Newbarrow; on the contrary, Tulip’s class status is treated as presumptuous and illegitimate, despite the fact that Targett’s

social mobility is made possible by her dowry. Moreover, the reception of a mixed heritage child born of an interracial marriage is dramatically different to that of a high born African orphan. Even Targett's open-hearted younger brother Harry, the only member of his family to embrace his brother's wife and child, professes a belief that William has "done wrong in bringing [Tulip] back with him to England, and in begetting these children that were neither one thing nor the other" (70). It seems that it is the possibility of a nascent Black British genealogy that offends even the most benign representative of English national character.

David Garnett's novel is a historical fiction of the early twentieth century. As such its depiction of the nineteenth century is mediated by the attitudes of modern writers to the world of their parents and grandparents. Garnett (1892-1981) was a member of the Bloomsbury circle, the son of Constance and Edward Garnett and the husband of Angelica Bell, the daughter of artists Vanessa Bell (Virginia Woolf's sister) and Duncan Grant. The recent publication of a biography of Garnett, *Bloomsbury's Outsider* (2015) by Sarah Knights, may be indicative of a revival of interest in a writer whose literary contribution has tended to be overshadowed both by the achievement of his more celebrated peers and by accounts of his romantic and sexual relationships with other members of the circle (see Licence, 2015; Nicholson, 2002).⁵ The Bloomsbury Group is associated with a particular set of attitudes towards their Victorian forebears and some critics have situated *The Sailor's Return* in this context. In her 1973 essay "Garnett's Amazon from Dahomey: Literary Debts in 'The Sailor's Return'", Ann S. Johnson traces parallels between Garnett's depiction of Tulip's family history and a publication by the prominent Victorian explorer and Orientalist, Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomey* (1864). Johnson's close comparative analysis provides persuasive evidence in support of her argument that Garnett's description of the African dance which Tulip performs for her husband and his brother in the parlour of their English home is indebted to Burton's account from his time in Dahomey. In other words, the Africa depicted in Garnett's novel is mediated by the imperial discourses of Victorian England. However, Johnson suggests that this apparent borrowing is not uncritical, emphasising the ways in which the narrative reverses the rhetoric of the dark continent: it is rural Dorset, not Africa, where Targett meets his tragic end. Indeed, Johnson argues that Burton is Garnett's "Eminent Victorian", implying that Garnett has extended

Lytton Strachey's irreverent treatment of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Gordon to Burton through the vehicle of intertextual allusion. Indeed, Johnson goes on to claim that "[l]ike every member of Bloomsbury, Garnett had rejected the values of Victorian colonialism" (1973: 185). The novel's ambivalent relationship with modernist discourses was further cast into relief by a post war adaptation for the stage. In 1947 the Ballet Rambert staged a performance of an adaptation of Garnett's *The Sailor's Return* with original choreography by Andrée Howard (1910-1968), once described as "the Virginia Woolf of choreographers" (Jones 2008: 1). Dance historian Susan Jones has argued that while this adaptation offers a "distinctively feminist reading of Garnett's text" (6) by foregrounding Tulip's perspective, it also "raises considerable problems for the postcolonial critic" (3), especially in its mobilisation of primitivist motifs in the choreography for Tulip's African dance, which was performed by a white dancer in black make-up.

The Sailor's Return is not a polemical novel and the author's position in relation to Victorian discourses of race is veiled by complex narrative strategies, often making use of free indirect discourse to render the prejudices and superstitions of his characters without direct authorial comment. The narrative's depiction of Tulip's plight seems strikingly sympathetic to the modern reader, but it is worth considering the possibility that the ironic undertow of the narrative may be as much concerned with puncturing Victorian pieties as with exposing Victorian racism. Nevertheless, Garnett's novel – set in what is effectively Hardy's Wessex – exposes the customs and characters of English country life as complicit in racial prejudice and violence (see Bourne, 2002). Nor does the narrative offer any consoling or redemptive resolution; it ends with an isolated Tulip in a position of indentured servitude, working without a wage in a community where her already anglicized name is reduced to a racist epithet, "Mrs Two Lips" (135). While Howard's stage adaptation may have helped to keep Garnett's novel in the collective cultural memory (hence meeting an important condition for subsequent adaptation), when it was adapted for the screen in the late 1970s it was the naturalism – rather than the modernism – of Garnett's narrative which was married with the social realism of post war British television drama.

British Television Drama, Anti-Racism and 1970s Britain

In *The Sailor's Return* (both novel and film), Targett meets his untimely end at the hands of an itinerant prize fighter. Approaching the end of his career and struggling to compete with his younger rivals, the boxer translates his economic desperation into racialized resentment: "It's all sheenies and niggers now. No time for an Englishman anymore" (*The Sailor's Return*, 1978).⁶ Indeed, the forms which racism takes in this film acquire renewed resonance when considered in the context of its production and reception in late 1970s Britain. In the novel and its film adaptation, social tensions arising out of economic inequality are converted into racial conflict, in ways which will have had new meaning in late 1970s Britain, with non white labour, "interracial" marriage and mixed heritage families becoming the focus of white prejudice and hostility. Released ten years after Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech and two years after the 1976 Race Relations Act sought to combat discrimination in the public sphere, *The Sailor's Return* was viewed in a context in which questions of race and racism had acquired a new prominence in popular, public and political discourses. Broadcast in a period which saw the coming of age of a British born second generation, the film's production and reception coincided with the rise of the National Front as a political party capitalising on working class alienation and the emergence of "anti-racist" movements within the traditional liberal left. In the context of 1970s British screen drama *The Sailor's Return* can profitably be considered within the "progressive" tradition of television drama, a liberal left aligned movement which privileged genres of social realism (see Caughie, 2008). However, its subject matter constitutes a significant departure from the political imperatives of a tradition which tended to privilege class over other vectors of oppression.

The Sailor's Return was made for theatrical release, premiered at the London Film Festival in 1978 and selected for inclusion at Cannes but despite the critical approval with which the film was met the producers were unable to obtain national distribution in the UK and the feature film was broadcast to a television audience in 1980 by ITV. Produced by Euston Films, a television production company which had branched into film, the film is currently available in a 2009 DVD box set, whose title references a long running, single play broadcast format which was at the heart of what has come to be known as the "golden age" of British television drama: *Armchair Theatre*. Along with the BBC's *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today*, ITV's *Armchair Theatre* was a central production

pillar of a significant era in British television drama which Lez Cooke has characterized as “an age . . . when it was possible to engage with the pressing social issues of the day and provoke argument and discussion, even social change, through the medium of the single play” (2003: 66). Cooke names Jack Gold (1930-2015) as one of a generation of television directors who emerged as “authors” from the golden age, alongside Alan Clarke, Richard Eyre, Stephen Frears, Roland Joffé, Ken Loach and John Mackenzie. A British film and television director who began his career as a freelance documentary film-maker, Gold is often situated in the British realist tradition, influenced by the documentary film movement and associated with the work of Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson.⁷ Caughie also identifies Tom Bell, who plays Targett in *The Sailor’s Return*, as one of a “new wave of actors” (78) whose careers were launched by *Armchair Theatre*. Indeed, the cast of *The Sailor’s Return* includes British character actors who proved a staple of realist television drama in the years that followed, including George Costigan as Targett’s kind-hearted brother Harry, Mick Ford as the loyal potboy Tom and Bernard Hill as the vicious carter, a key instigator of racist violence. Caughie has argued that *Armchair Theatre*, under the creative direction of producer Sydney Newman, constituted a “decisive moment in the history of British television drama” (2000:74) because it “created a new televisual space in which the drama of social relationship and social situations could be acted out” (2000: 77). This new “social space of class and region” (2000:77) is most closely associated with working class dramas in contemporary urban settings. However, the acclaimed and controversial historical drama series *Days of Hope*, (BBC, Dir. Ken Loach, 1975), depicting the lives of a working class family during a period from the First World War to the General Strike of 1925, has also come to be seen as a landmark in a tradition of naturalistic and politically engaged drama. In response to its apparent departure from the political imperatives of the present, Tony Garnett, the producer of *Days of Hope*, is recorded as commenting: ““Our motive for going to the past is not to escape the present: we go to the past to draw lessons from it. History is contemporary”” (Cooke, 2003: 99). I would argue that a similar strategy is at work in *The Sailor’s Return* but with a focus on racial prejudice rather than class conflict.

A long history of Black British and British Asian resistance to racism, often closely allied with the labour movement and anti-imperial struggles in international contexts, is outlined in A.

Sivanandan's landmark 1982 collection, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*. However, as Paul Gilroy has observed, "the content of anti-racism has not always been a direct response to the ideologies and practices of racism" (1997: 147). Indeed, in a pivotal intervention, Gilroy argues that the anti-racism which emerged in the 1970s on the British left sought to integrate the struggle against racism within existing historical traditions of class struggle and the fight against fascism. Provoked more by the entry of the far right into the democratic process than by the experiences of Black British people, Gilroy suggests that black liberation was not the primary goal of these movements:

Organizations of this type have directed their efforts and their appeal more towards whites than blacks. They have been concerned not directly with the enhancement of the power of the oppressed or disadvantaged groups but with the development of racially harmonious social and political relations. (1997: 150)

The emergence of anti-racism on the British left might provide an explanatory context for the thematic shift from class to race in this drama of the progressive television tradition. However, Gilroy's critique also raises questions about the ways in which Black British experience is depicted in *The Sailor's Return*. Tulip and her two children (a British born daughter dies soon after birth) are depicted in an exclusively white environment, in which isolation and assimilation supplant collective identity and community. In this context exceptionalism could easily come into play, with Tulip's experience reduced to an individual anomaly rather than a historical precedent. Moreover, Targett often assumes a dominant narrative role in the drama, confidently explicating both the prejudices of his white neighbours and the behaviour of his African wife to those around him and by extension to the viewer. In this context it might seem reasonable to observe that *The Sailor's Return* is more a drama of white reaction than black agency. Moreover, Tulip is the daughter of the King of Dahomey, an African kingdom which played a leading role in the slave trade: as Joan Anim-Addo records "approximately one fifth of Africans taken as slaves during the eighteenth century came from the region around Dahomey" (2003: 13). When Targett refers to the descendents of slaves from Dahomey who now work on the plantations of America, Tulip exclaims: "Oh, that riff-raff . . . My family sold thousands of them every year" (Garnett, 2011: 91). Indeed, Targett and Tulip's relationship is an indirect product of the trading routes of transatlantic slavery and both are implicated in the slave trade.

Targett agrees to captain a Brazilian slaver to Bahia as a favour for a merchant who had given him refuge; he refuses to repeat the favour and declines payment but is subsequently wary of British vessels for fear of being captured and transported to Botany Bay for his crime. Targett and Tulip are essentially individualists who pursue personal fulfilment (whether romantic or economic) in defiance of social conventions of class and kin; as such their relationship to collective histories of oppression – whether of race or class – is inevitably ambivalent. However, the film’s challenge to ideologies of racism is not limited to questions of character or agency but rather extends to broader discourses of race, as embodied in motifs which play a significant role in constructions of national identity in British historical film genres: the countryside and costume.

“White Landscapes”: Rurality and Race in *The Sailor’s Return*

If the historical setting of the adaptation of *The Sailor’s Return* represents a departure from the contemporary social concerns which characterize the tradition of television drama outlined by Caughie and Cooke, its focus on a rural rather than an urban setting is similarly novel. *The Sailor’s Return* introduces questions of race and racism to the classic social realist preoccupation with class; its depiction of a black Victorian woman and her children in a rural setting and its revelation of the effects of prejudice and violence within an English village pose an important challenge to racialized constructions of the countryside.

In her 2013 book, *The Postcolonial Country in Contemporary Literature*, Lucienne Loh argues that: “The politics of empire, race and immigration often seem distilled within the multicultural landscapes of *urban* Britain” (7, emphasis added). The equation of the “black body and the built landscape” (Procter, 2003: 164) serves to construct the urban environment as the exclusive location of Black British experience and by default to define the rural environment as what Julian Agyeman and Rachel Spooner call a “white landscape” (1997: 197). As Loh comments, a key effect of this construction is that “histories of empire within rural England are rarely visible, acknowledged or publically disseminated” (2013: 7). Imagined and idealized versions of the English countryside play a prominent role in constructions of national identity, including historical film, and can be mobilized to promote forms of national and political nostalgia which are implicitly racialized. Sarah Neal observes

that the “ironic contradiction of a highly industrialized and urbanized country using rurality as pervasive representation of its identity is significant because it is based on a de-racialized nostalgia for a pre multicultural Britain” (2002: 444). In other words, if the rural landscape stands for an idealized pre-industrial past and the Black British presence is equated with an urban modernity then a “nostalgia” for a rural past may also be a coded expression of a desire to “return” to a Britain unpopulated by non white subjects. This nostalgia is premised on the assumption that both the past and the countryside are places without a Black British presence – premises which *The Sailor’s Return* challenges. The heritage industry – and its cultural counterpart the heritage film – is one of the places in which ideological fantasies about national and historical relationships to the rural environment are most intensely played out. Loh suggests that the heritage industry, which emerged during the New Right hegemony of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in the 1980s, “harnessed the English countryside as the last bastion of uncorrupted English life, tradition and history” in the context of “fears about the overwhelming influx of immigrants and the corruption influence of their foreign ways” (2013: 209-210). Indeed, critiques of the heritage aesthetic in film and television drama, closely associated with literary adaptations such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), have centred on the politics of national nostalgia. In “A Green and Pleasant Land: Rural Spaces and British Cinema”, Andrew Higson defines the heritage film as “set in the past, often peopled by the upper classes, and with narratives unfolding in a traditional, apparently preindustrial southern England” (2006: 240-241). Indeed, he suggests that the combination of historical and rural setting has come to be seen as representing a quintessential Englishness. In this context, the “insertion” (Young, 1995: 102) of Black British people into representations of the past, and the cherished spaces of the rural landscape, can be understood not only as implicit assertions of national identity (contesting the equation of Englishness with “whiteness”) but also as challenges to dominant narratives of English history.

In his essay “Rurality and English Identity,” Alun Howkins identifies the “ideal social structure” of modern ruralist ideology as the “village with its green, pub and church” (2001: 151). These are the very spaces in which dramas of racial tension, conflict and violence are acted out for modern audiences in the late twentieth century film adaptation of *The Sailor’s Return*. Firstly, the

village church is the site of forced cultural and religious assimilation, with Tulip coerced into allowing her son to be baptized and into undertaking a second marriage ceremony within alien Christian rites. In the film, tensions between Targett and Tulip and the evangelising parson are dramatized in an encounter in which the couple trespass in the Reverend Cronk's rose garden, violating the quintessentially English territorial marker of the garden gate. Secondly, the village green, and the stream which runs through it, separates the inn from the neighbouring households in the film adaptation and becomes the site of territorial disputes when Targett takes a horse and wagon hostage across the water in revenge for the carter's attempted violence against his son. The further edges of this communal space are overseen by the elder women of the village, who subject Tulip to silent and sinister surveillance from their stations at the extended domestic threshold of the cottage garden. Finally, the village inn is both a private and a public space, as a family home to Targett, Tulip and their son and as a site of communal recreation for the labouring men of the locality. It is this space which is the target of a collective act of violence when economically and racially motivated resentment is given expression through an attempted act of arson.

Indeed, the village inn acquires a particular significance in an adaptation of a narrative which appropriates a recurring trope in English folk culture. Under Targett's stewardship the *Sailor's Return* assumes a distinctly nautical atmosphere, from the parrot which welcomes thirsty customers to the ship's figurehead which adorns its exterior. This impression is underlined in the adaptation by an original score (which earned its composer, Carl Davis, a British Association of Film and Television Arts Award) in which fiddle, flute and accordion evoke a recurring hornpipe motif, in a style reminiscent of the classical English folk revival of earlier twentieth century composers such as Vaughan Williams, Delius, Grainger and Holst. The returning sailor of the title – Targett himself – in many ways exemplifies traits traditionally attributed to the national character, such as tolerance, pragmatism and fair play, but he and his African wife find themselves the victims of English insularity, prejudice and malice. Indeed, the inn as a landlocked ship acquires a different symbolism when placed in the context of the interlocking transatlantic histories of colonialism, capitalism and slavery. In his landmark 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy offers the “image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and

the Caribbean as a central organising symbol” (4) for his counter history of the African diaspora. Targett and Tulip’s son Sambo – renamed Billy in the adaptation but addressed as Olu by his mother – crosses the Atlantic twice: the first time in liberty (albeit concealed in a basket) with his parents, the second time entrusted to an English sailor on a vessel heading to the West African coast, his mother’s coins by no means a guarantor of his safety. The docks at Southampton bookend the narrative but it is in the village stream – an English tributary to the sea – that violent, oppressive and murderous undercurrents emerge when the carter’s men abduct Sambo / Billy, with the words: ““Drown the little bastard in the stream, Jemmy. We won’t have them here breeding black babies in England”” (Garnett, 2011: 3).⁸ The renaming of Sambo in the 1978 film adaptation suggests a sensitivity to the offence which might be caused to Black British audiences by the use of name which combines historical origins in colonialism and slavery with abusive usage in contemporary contexts. However, the contemporary resonance of racist hostility to the birth of British born “black babies” – symbolic both of the long term settlement of first generation immigrants and of the emergence of new generations of interracial families and mixed race children – is not evaded in this provocative scene.

Re-dressing the Victorians: the “mixed world” of *The Sailor’s Return*

In her 2012 essay, “Cultural Archaeology and Historical Geographies of the Black Presence in Rural England”, Caroline Bressay argues that “black histories of England are intimately connected to the rural” (386); challenging prevailing historical discourses of English heritage, Bressay points out that “unnamed servants and enslaved men, women and children . . . lived and worked on the country estates of the lords, ladies and gentlemen who owned them” (386). Period drama, including the often demeaned sub-genre of costume drama, can play a significant role in perpetuating or challenging popular perceptions about the past. Amma Asante’s 2013 film, *Belle*, attracted considerable critical attention for its appropriation of the conventions of costume drama to tell the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804), the mixed race great niece of Lord Mansfield (author of a historic ruling in 1772 in favour of James Somerset, an escaped American slave) and subject of a portrait painting with her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray in 1779. The novelty not only of a narrative of Black British history occupying centre stage in a British period drama but also of a Black British actress appearing in

period dress, some twenty five years after the first broadcast of *The Sailor's Return* in 1978, is indicative of the entrenched nature of racialized codes of representation in British historical film.

Visual pleasure, quality production and an emphasis on historical authenticity in relation to period design (including costume) are often privileged in film and television dramas driven by a heritage aesthetic, arguably at the expense of the material and political realities of the production, consumption and social uses of dress. In Garnett's novel and its film adaptation, dress plays an important role as a marker of contested social mobility. Returning from their English wedding ceremony Targett and Tulip are perceived to be "flaunting themselves openly in their fine clothes quite as if they were the quality" (Garnett, 2011: 80). The use of free indirect discourse here suggests an emerging collective opinion in which admiration mingles with resentment. As the narrative approaches its tragic denouement, class resentment has matured into outright hostility and is expressed in language which is explicitly racialized: "That black girl of yours is too saucy for our liking, Mr Targett, and you set her up in it by dressing her as if she were a lady. What she wants is a touch of a whip like mine" (Garnett, 2011: 119).⁹ In this context, this article will conclude with close analysis of two significant – and wordless – scenes from the film adaptation. The first centres on Tulip's visit to a dressmakers shop following their arrival on English shores and marks her spectacular induction into the dress codes of English identity; themes of cultural assimilation, gender conformity and class mobility are at work here. The second concerns a fantasy sequence – the only one in the adaptation – which externalizes the "mixed world" (Garnett, 2011: 94) of England and Africa which Tulip imagines in the novel; in this sequence, Tulip symbolically "re-dresses" her white English neighbours in an act of attempted negotiation with, and transformation of, the terms of national identity as expressed through dress.

In Garnett's novel, Targett and Tulip travel by train from Southampton to Poole where Targett commands the proprietor of an establishment by the name of "Mrs Frickes, Modiste" to "rig this lady with the best dresses you have got; for she is a lady" (7). Targett purchases a "ready-made dress model" of the "latest fashion" as well as ordering "two workaday gowns" (Garnett, 2011: 7) to be made. The party then move on to Mr Catt's the drapers where stockings, handkerchiefs and a crinoline are obtained. This outing attracts considerable interest from the townspeople and when Tulip

leaves the drapers in her new set of clothes her appearance is remarked upon by a small crowd: “A gasp of surprise, even of admiration, was heard on all sides, for Tulip was very finely dressed now and looked quite a grand lady in her new clothes, though to be sure her poor face was still black” (Garnett, 2011: 8). By the time they arrive in Dorchester their presence confers a “holiday look” on the town “because so many people bustled out of the shops to see them, loitered along the same street, or stopped in the road and stared at them frankly, and turned round to gape again until they were out of sight” (Garnett, 2011: 10).

The surprise at Tulip’s transformation into “quite a grand lady” has multiple dimensions which are revealing of the gender, class and racial dimensions of her identity as constructed in this re-imagined Victorian context. Firstly, Tulip is quite literally transformed into a lady in the eyes of the crowd because she enters Mrs Frickes disguised as a man, having assumed masculine clothing for the duration of her passage. Designated only as “the negro” (Garnett, 2011: 2) and even the “blackamoor” (Garnett, 2011: 3) in the initial stages of the narrative, Tulip’s identity is entirely equated with her race; she is constructed as a racial “Other” through historic discourses dating back to the seventeenth century but crucially consolidated by the slave trade and its production of “the negro” as a racial type defined by inferiority. Moreover, Tulip’s gender identity is occluded by her perceived race to the point that she is mistakenly identified as her child’s father. It is not simply that her gender is concealed by masculine attire but more that her perceived racial identity is at odds with dominant constructions of Victorian femininity which are implicitly white. The news that “a Negro had turned out to be a woman” (Garnett, 2011: 8) suggests that the two categories are mutually exclusive and that to attain femininity she will have to forfeit her perceived racial difference. In becoming a lady Tulip is also undergoing a class transformation; or rather – since Tulip is royal born – her sartorial metamorphosis is a marker of Targett’s social mobility, the quality of her dress a token of his new social status.

The theatricality of the visit to Mrs Frickes is accentuated in the film adaptation where the interior of her shop serves as a stage on which Tulip (Shope Shodeinde) performs her new role, with the window of the small shop populated with curious and animated faces. Indeed, with a rather formal hand gesture that seems to have its origins in the language of stage performance, Targett (Tom Bell)

presents Tulip to her audience, inviting and even encouraging their gaze. In a scene without dialogue or overheard speech, the racialized undercurrents of the spectacle are unspoken and the “holiday” (Garnett, 2011: 10) mood more prominent. However, some key motifs are established here which will acquire more complicated and problematic meanings as the drama progresses: namely, Targett and Tulip’s occupancy of spaces in which the public and private are conflated; the symbolism of thresholds, whether windows, doorways, gates or gardens; and the politics of the gaze as neighbourly curiosity gives way to surveillance and intimidation. At the close of this scene rapid cutting between Tulip’s costume changes and the onlookers’ reactions gives way to a close up of Tulip’s face, framed by a new bonnet dressed with white lace. Her open and receptive expression of tentative pleasure provides a poignant contrast with the second scene which I wish to examine, in which a close up of a very differently dressed face registers a changed interiority. What is notably missing from this transformation of a “Negro” into a “lady” is any visual or material survival of the dress culture of Tulip’s West African home. Masculine European dress is a prerequisite for Tulip’s safe passage to England as a woman and it seems that even before her arrival her cultural identity has been overwritten. However, the most striking interpolation in the adaptation occurs in the imagining of a “mixed world” in which the mingling of African and English culture is signified in movement, music and dress.

In Garnett’s novel Tulip’s perspectives on English customs give rise to some sharp satirical insights, especially in relation to the rituals and practices of English Christianity but also in relation to the world of work, leisure and recreation. The drudgery of the lives of the rural labouring classes particularly appals her and while her attitude is filtered through class privilege her dismay centres on the absence of public festivity. In the novel Tulip’s nostalgia for the Dahomeyan court is juxtaposed with the reality of daily life in an English village which gives rise to a passing fancy:

Then Tulip began to imagine a mixed world, half Africa and half England. If a dozen drums with pipes, cymbals, and rattles were set up on the village green, would that bring the people out to dance? Tulip laughed aloud at the incongruity of such people dancing to proper music; then she thought of the labourers’ soiled corduroy trousers and their huge hobnailed boots and she was silent with disgust. (Garnett, 2011: 94)

This imagined world is externalized in the adaptation in one of the few interpolated scenes in a largely faithful adaptation. In the novel, the sound of a Mrs Everitt beating her fire-irons to ward off a swarm of bees provides a welcome acoustic accompaniment to Tulip's English wedding day: "The sound pleased Tulip; it reminded her of the drums at her father's court" (Garnett, 2011: 78). In the adapted scene, the sounds emanating from the blacksmith's forge serve a similar function, but trigger a flight of fancy which transports African musicians and dancers to the village green at Maiden Newbarrow. The village revellers include a range of recognisable characters including the potboy Tom, Targett's brother Harry, the housekeeper Mrs Clall and the blacksmith himself, Freddy Leake. Pointedly, it also includes the Reverend Cronk whose offer to "wash white" Tulip's unbaptized son had caused her real alarm. In this sequence Tulip modestly but significantly undresses her neighbours; divested of the loathed shoes they joyfully participate barefoot in expressive syncopated movement, the rapid cuts and oblique angles of the camera evoking a world in which everyday hierarchies and boundaries are set askew. The advancing crowd depicted here is not the intimidating mob which besieged the inn with malicious intent but rather a festive parade whose mobility is without sinister motivation. The primary colours and contrasting prints of the textiles worn by the African performers contrast with the browns, greys and blacks of English formal or working dress; wrapped, tied and folded to the contours of the body to allow freedom of movement, African style dress is a counterpoint to the tailored structures of Victorian fashion, especially for women. The African dress depicted in this fantasy sequence in this 1978 production is not historically or culturally specific and as such it may risk reinforcing problematic oppositions between Western fashion and "native" dress (see Rovine, 2009). However, the presence of these performers is perhaps as much a testament to the contemporary moment of production as to the nineteenth century past; the Steel 'n Span dance company acknowledged in the production credits is perhaps expressive of contemporary Black British cultural production, possibly celebrating the heritage of the African diaspora through a pan-African aesthetic.

Tulip's costume is of special note here. The scene begins with a considered selection of outfit to mark a solemn occasion – a visit to the grave of Tulip and Targett's infant daughter. The smart blue silk is identical to the one which Tulip wears at the close of the scene at the dressmakers and which she later wears at her English wedding but here the bonnet and veil are discarded for an adapted

headdress which appears in this scene only. Tulip's uncovered head is adorned with shells threaded onto black ribbon in a striking departure from customs of dress in a rural English village and the most visible public expression of African heritage to appear in the adaptation. The motif of the shell – certainly not alien to English decorative design culture – has a particular significance for Tulip. In both novel and film she surreptitiously places a handful of shells in the baptismal font of the village church before entrusting her son to the parson's hands. In the adaptation, she is also depicted as concealing shells in the loose brickwork of the kitchen range in her new English home. The specific significance, function and origin of these shells is not disclosed but it is clear that they have a role to play in translating a strange and sometimes hostile environment into a safe or familiar space. The combination of the strung shells and silk gown transform Tulip into an embodiment of the "mixed world" which she fantasizes. However, the same brow which sports this signifier of African heritage is the target of a missile thrown by an unseen hand. The blow shatters her reverie and is a prelude to a calculated act of menace, whereby an aggressive bull is released into Tulip and her son's path. A swinging gate is the only visual evidence of the malicious agency of Tulip's unseen assailants, whose chosen vehicle for their indirect aggression – the bull – is a potent symbol of English masculinity and national chauvinism. In this scene, costume serves as a vehicle through which the tensions between coercive cultural assimilation and expressions of new forms of Black British identity are subtly dramatized. Tulip's self-fashioning lends agency to her narrative point of view – materialising her private vision for the film audience – before it is violently interrupted by a crude assertion of white power. However, Tulip (a former soldier in her father's army) demonstrates courage in the face of racist hostility; charging towards the advancing bull, she succeeds in diverting it away from her son and towards her aggressors. Tulip's apparent fearlessness provides an affecting contrast with her defeated demeanour at the end of the film but it is striking that in this scene the emergence of a distinctly Black British expressive culture (signified through adapted dress) combines with an act of bold and defiant resistance.

In conclusion, at a time when the relative invisibility of Black British history on British film and television screens continues to attract criticism, the critically overlooked 1978 film adaptation of

David Garnett's 1925 novel *The Sailor's Return* represents an important precedent. A late twentieth century adaptation of a modernist historical novel, the film offers a multiply mediated depiction of an otherwise rarely seen Victorian past. As such it provides a productive opportunity to reflect on the relationship between historical representations and the contemporary contexts which produce them. Emerging out of a British social realist tradition of film and television drama, the film adaptation departs from a more familiar focus on class in modern urban environments to examine racism in a historical rural setting. Predating the heritage aesthetic which came to dominate British period drama (including literary adaptation) in the 1980s and 1990s, *The Sailor's Return* (1978) represents alternative modes of depicting the past in film narrative, as exemplified in its uses of rural landscapes and period costume to expose the coercive and violent forces at work in ideologies of cultural assimilation. As an intervention in the post war tradition of politically engaged drama and the anti-racism discourses of the British left in the 1970s, the 1978 film adaptation can be considered a significant cultural response to the politics of race and class in 1970s Britain. Finally, as a counter history of the Black British presence – revisiting the nineteenth century from early and late twentieth century perspectives – *The Sailor's Return* speaks to the present, posing important questions about the role of cultural representation in challenging the politics of historical memory. Principally, it asks for how much longer the inclusion of Black British figures in cultural representations of the past will be seen either as remarkable “aberrations” or strategic “insertions.”

¹ Black British actors, performers, industry professionals and organisations, such as The British Blacklist (thebritishblacklist.com), have been at the forefront of campaigns for change in the British media industry. In 2014 Lenny Henry used the prestigious annual BAFTA Television Lecture as a platform to draw attention to the industry's failure to address the

ongoing under-representation of ethnic minorities on and behind British screens, with the popular period drama and cultural export *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-2015) serving as an example of the invisibility of Black British history on British television screens. Henry's lecture has been pivotal in galvanising industry responses. In 2015 the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Ofcom commissioned a set of guidelines for the British media industry designed to overcome barriers to diversity, in 2015 Channel 4 launched its 360° Diversity Charter and in 2016 the BBC launched a major new Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. In the November 2016 edition of *Sight & Sound*, a special issue devoted to "Black British Stardom" and published to coincide with the launch of *Black Star*, the British Film Institute's nationwide celebration of black actors in film and television, David Oyelowo made the following comments: "We all love a period drama in the UK, as do I, and I spent many a Sunday evening watching yet another iteration of Jane Austen or Dickens . . . But as a proud Brit I never saw myself reflected. . . I knew black people had been in Britain for centuries, but that fact was never reflected on screen" ("Moving the Needle: David Oyelowo," *Sight & Sound*, 2016: 20).

² The terms 'English' and 'British' are used in this article to differentiate – not conflate – historical, cultural and political formations and representations of national identity.

³ See Bressay (2012) for a discussion of the paradoxes of visibility in relation to visual culture, the rural and English heritage practice.

⁴ The "human zoo" is given satirical treatment by Garnett in *A Man in the Zoo* (1924), in which a white man volunteers to become an exhibit in a zoo following a romantic quarrel.

⁵ David Garnett was a leading character in the recent television drama about the Bloomsbury circle adapted from Licence's book, *Life in Squares* (BBC, 2015).

⁶ This character is identified as Jack Sait in the novel, where he reports that his agent has his "hands full with a nigger-boy" and accuses the "Sheenies" [Irish] of "taking up the game

now they see there is money in it.” Sait declares: ““A British sportsman backing a bloody black man and letting Jack Sait starve! It isn’t right”” (Garnett, 2011: 106).

⁷ Gold’s most notable films prior to *The Sailor’s Return* include *The National Health* (1973), a satirical comedy adapted from Peter Nichols’ stage play, *Man Friday* (1975) adapted from Adrian Mitchell’s role reversal stage play and *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) adapted from Quentin Crisp’s memoir.

⁸ British seaports (including Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, Hull, London, Liverpool, Newport, Cardiff and Barry) were the site of widely reported racially motivated riots between January and August of 1919, six years before the publication of *The Sailor’s Return* (see Jenkinson, 2009).

⁹ The sexualized violence threatened by the “touch of the whip” invokes the gendered power dynamics of chattel slavery. Mid-Victorian Britons gained an awareness of the cruelty and injustice of American slavery not only through the efforts of British abolitionists but also through the spoken and published words of African American anti-slavery campaigners, many of whom undertook speaking tours of Britain.

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