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## The Diverse Spaces of Play for Today

Eleni Liarou

### Abstract

Of the roughly 300 Play for Today dramas, a dozen have a non-white writer or director, and/or deal with the experiences of black and Asian communities in urban England. These dramas are a tiny proportion of the overall body of work but nevertheless offer bold, often uncompromising representations of race, class and generational divisions in 1970s and early 1980s British culture. Focusing on space – in both the physical and cultural sense - this article explores the ways in which the use of location filming, in conjunction with the use of the studio in these dramas, allowed for a greater *range* of stories to be told, while offering new insights into the social and historical experiences of black and Asian communities. The ‘journey narratives’ of these plays expand the physical and cultural geography of the dramas and temporally connect a complex set of historical experiences, not previously seen on British television.

**Keywords:** Play for Today; TV single play; race; ethnic diversity; space; film and video.

Birmingham Airport, 1981: an Asian cleaner picks up from the floor the garland that’s been dropped by an Asian woman who has just been deported. In the background a British Airways advert reads ‘We’ll take more care of you’.

This scene from Play for Today’s *The Garland* (BBC1, 10 March 1981) is the culmination of the story of Nadira’s deportation that leaves her family and friends heartbroken and devastated. The scene captures not only the unmissable political irony and brutal realism which so often characterised the strand; it also sums up some of the key themes of a set of plays dealing with the experiences of Britain's black and Asian communities: the liminal spaces immigrants seem to occupy (for example airports), migrant workers (for example cleaners) as a key feature of the British economy, the colours and cultures (garland) migrants brought to the cities and towns of postwar Britain.

Of the roughly 300 Play for Today dramas, a dozen have a non-white writer or director, and/or tackle questions of British black and Asian experiences. These dramas are a

tiny proportion of the overall body of work for this strand, but they offer bold, often uncompromising representations of race, class and generational divisions in 1970s and early 1980s British culture. There are three plays by non-white writers: *In the Beautiful Caribbean* (3 February 1972) by the Jamaican playwright Barry Reckord, and two by the Trinidad-born British filmmaker, Horace Ové, who wrote and directed *A Hole in Babylon* (29 November 1979) and co-wrote *The Garland* with H.O. Nazareth. The other plays I will discuss here are: *Gangsters* (9 January 1975), *A Passage to England* (9 December 1975), *Destiny* (31 January 1978), *Waterloo Sunset* (23 January 1979), *Murder Rap* (31 January 1980), *3 Minute Heroes* (26 October 1982) and *King* (3 April 1984).

By analysing these dramas together my aim is twofold: to tease out themes and representational patterns that cut across time and genre, and to explore the extent to which these are shaped by form and production context. I will use the concept of space – both physical and cultural – to explore the ways in which some of these dramas use location filming, in conjunction with the use of studio, to record and witness multicultural Britain, but also to reflect on changing notions of Britishness in the context of economic decline, loss of empire and the clash between a growing far-right, anti-immigrant discourse and anti-racist politics. I argue that, as these plays move aesthetically between film and studio, they often expand – socially and culturally – TV representation. Questions of cultural representation, aesthetics and technology are, in this regard, inextricably linked together, with the concept of space used here to refer to material places and production technologies as well as to discourses of identity, ethnicity and culture.

If these dramas do expand the social canvas of representations of black and Asian identity and culture, what is this expansion measured against? From the late 1950s, the TV single play addressed questions of race; for example, ITV's Armchair Theatre, Television Playhouse and Play of the Week brought in new writers who, by representing the regional

and commercial structure of the ITV network, wrote in a more popular vein and targeted a wider spectrum of audiences. Some of these writers reflected on the experience of black migrants, placing their stories alongside those of the white working class at a time when the British New Wave created a cultural space within which notions of British national identity could be reworked and redefined. The public visibility of Britain's black population, especially after the 1958 Nottingham and Notting Hill race riots, coincided with that historical moment and was caught up in its TV representations (Liarou 2012). Examples of such plays include *Hot Summer Night* (ITV, 1 February 1959), *The Man Condemned* (ITV, 3 December 1960), *The Blood Fight* (ITV, 9 October 1959), *Big Brain Man* (ITV, 11 September 1960) and *You in Your Small Corner* (ITV, 5 June 1962). Despite its radical credentials, the BBC's Wednesday Play was mostly silent on issues of race; the exceptions were John Hopkins' *Fable* (27 January 1965) and the Nigerian playwright Obi Egbuna's *Wind Versus Polygamy* (27 May 1970), the latter originally transmitted in BBC2's *Theatre 625* strand on 15 July 1968.<sup>1</sup>

What is disappointingly similar to the years of Play for Today is that the majority of these dramas were written from a white perspective. With few exceptions, such as Barry Reckord's *You in Your Small Corner*, Charles Sebree and Greer Johnson's Sunday Night Theatre play *Mrs Patterson* (BBC, 17 June 1956), Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (ITV, 5 January 1960) and *The Big Pride* (ITV, 28 May 1961) written by the Guyanese writer Jan Carew and his Jamaican wife Sylvia Wynter, there were, as Stephen Bourne (1998: 68) notes, 'few openings for black dramatists in television at the time' and this continued well into the 1970s. The loss of Barry Reckord's *In the Beautiful Caribbean* (3 February 1972) leaves a further gap in our understanding of black-authored drama for Play for Today. A still from the play accompanies the *Radio Times* description, which reads: 'Blue Sky, blue sea,

beautiful people, beautiful music but that doesn't pay the rent when you're out of work and there are no jobs. Not even in the beautiful Caribbean'.<sup>2</sup>

The BFI has also released some rare images of the play.<sup>3</sup> Another fragment of evidence about the making of the play comes from its producer Irene Shubik, who remembers a somewhat chaotic script, 'with the seeds of a Brechtian musical on the developing political consciousness of Black Jamaica'. And yet Shubik saw in it a rare depiction of the background from which Jamaicans came to England, showing the poverty which motivated their emigration. The play's all-black cast and its reliance on a large number of actors who had to sing as well as act posed unprecedented challenges for the production team, but Shubik described it as 'one of the most worthwhile and enjoyable experiments' in which she had ever been involved (2000: 135-6).

There are two key differences between *Play for Today* and earlier TV single-play strands. First, whereas in the 1950s and early 1960s TV drama focused predominantly on black migrants from the West Indies and Africa, the 1970s saw a proliferation of fictional representations of Asian identity and culture. Historically, this reflected an increase in Asian migration to the UK from the early 1960s onwards and it is very much evident in *A Passage to England*, *Gangsters*, *Murder Rap*, *Destiny* and *The Garland*.

Secondly, very little audiovisual material exists from that early period (1950s to early 1960s), since most TV was live, and so our knowledge of the TV single play tends to be limited. What is certain, though, is that these plays are formally different as they are studio-bound and often quite restricted in the kind of stories they tell. Filmed inserts and montage sequences of exterior locations were occasionally used in order to extend the visual palette, expand the narrative world of a drama or change its pace, and to allow actors and crew to change sets and costumes. These early white-authored dramas are mostly 'social problem' narratives, whereby the black migrant is placed at the centre of racial anxieties about

‘miscegenation’, the housing crisis and unemployment. In the 1970s, the use of location filming in the plays discussed here, often in conjunction with the use of studio, allowed for a greater range of stories to be told, while offering new insights into the social and historical experiences of black and Asian communities. For example, at the heart of the narratives of most of these plays is a journey which often implies the idea of going back home, metaphorically or physically, and the dream of a long-lost land (imaginary or real). I call these ‘journey narratives’ since they expand the physical and cultural geography of the drama and temporally connect a complex set of historical experiences. These are, in other words, journeys in time and place that indicate the scale and depth of change in Britain’s urban centres through the immediacy of location filming and the intimacy of the studio set. The plays explore the transformation of cities (London, Birmingham, Coventry), generational divides cutting across class and race, intercultural exchanges of youth culture and music, the legacy of Powellism and the re-emergence of far-right politics, forced journeys (deportation), political journeys (Black power, Rastafari), psychological journeys as voyages of identity, self-discovery and self-invention.

This expansion of stories about race and racism was also shaped by the broader historical context; by the 1970s, black and Asian British communities were entering their second generation. They could no longer be seen as newcomers or transient figures; in fact, the second- generation youth not only exposed the delusions of assimilation, they reinvigorated anti-racist politics, as well as culture and music (reggae, Two Tone). Race politics was changing radically too. As A. Sivanandan aptly put it, “‘race’ became an area of contestation for power. It was an issue on which elections were won and lost, it had swelled into an ideology of racism to be borrowed by the courts in their decision-making and by the fascists for their regeneration’ (2008: 106). At the same time, more militant forms of resistance developed, particularly after Malcom X's 1965 visit to Britain, which became the

catalyst for the formation of the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS) which took in African, Asian, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American dimensions of struggle. In 1967, Obi Egbuna headed the Universal Coloured Peoples' Association (UCPA), which stressed the need to fight both imperialism and racism, with the anti-white struggle being both anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (ibid.: 108).

The wider landscape of black and Asian TV drama was slowly changing too. *Rainbow City* (BBC1, 1967), developed by black actor/writer Horace James and John Elliot, was the first series with a central black character, while black actors were beginning to have a scattered presence in soap opera in the 1970s, following much pressure by Equity's Coloured Artists Committee (Malik 2002: 141). A breakthrough came in 1978, with BBC Birmingham's soap opera *Empire Road*, written by a black writer (Michael Abbensetts) with an all-black cast. Out of BBC Birmingham, with its commitment to regional cultures and talent, came *Gangsters* and *The Garland*, as well as a number of ground-breaking multi-ethnic dramas, including Abbensetts' *Black Christmas* (BBC, 20 December 1977) and Tara Prem's *A Touch of Eastern Promise* (BBC, 8 February 1973), the first British TV drama with an entirely Asian cast.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this article builds on an extensive body of scholarly research going beyond mere oppositions between studio and location, video and film, and foregrounds TV single play series such as *Play for Today* as discursive and hybrid spaces of production technologies and cultural influences (Bignell 2014; Rolinson 2020; Cooke 2003; Hill 2007).

#### London, Birmingham, Coventry: witnessing change

The transformation of England's urban centres as a result of postwar immigration is a recurring theme in *Play for Today*. Two plays which are rooted in London's working class

and multi-ethnic communities are *Waterloo Sunset* and *Murder Rap*. Queenie Watts, an actress known for her broad cockney accent and musical persona, stars in both. In *Waterloo Sunset* she is Grace, a 70-year-old who leaves an old peoples' home to return to her birthplace in Lambeth after being away for twelve years. In one of the play's most iconic moments the camera leaves the studio to chart Grace's journey from Waterloo station to the streets around Lambeth. This is a significant journey that records the physical and social changes of this part of London and captures Grace's emotional turmoil as she looks for her home only to find that it has been demolished and in its place a group of homeless people are gathered around a fire. The next shock comes when she witnesses a black man, Jeff (Larrington Walker), being attacked and badly hurt by a group of white youths. A bond between these two is created as she helps him to get home, when she is bewildered by the absence of any reason or provocation for the attack. Grace has entered a new world of racism on the streets of London.

Similar stories of second-generation black youth and their lived experiences of racism were represented in radical black theatre, with which writer Barrie Keeffe had been familiar through his association with 1970s fringe theatre (Shaw 2017: 115). In the play's location scenes, director Richard Eyre conveys the scale of change as seen through the eyes of Grace, who, having been shut away for so long, is more familiar with the racism of the 1930s than of the 1970s. Not only does Grace, whose socialist husband fought in the Spanish Civil War, instinctively side with the vulnerable and the powerless; she recognises how racism takes on different forms and targets different groups.

In *Murder Rap*, Queenie Watts has a rather different role as Lilian, wife of Wallie (Arthur Lovegrove). The couple are to be moved to a new flat as the authorities have agreed that their East London council estate, Brady House, will now house several Bengali families recently arrived in the UK. Wallie and Lilian refuse to leave the flat and neighbourhood in



which they have always lived. Filmed partly on location, the play deals with the working-class couple's resistance to the changes proposed. As the play suggests, these changes are bound up with party political agendas on immigration and housing, with Brady House providing the physical symbol of the increasingly politicised debate on race, belonging and Britishness in the 1970s.

The play's writer, Michael Hastings, had seen success on stage with *Gloo Joo* (1978), a farcical play about a West Indian threatened with deportation from the UK. It was adapted for London Weekend Television in 1979 and its location scenes were filmed in Brixton, in the council block where Hastings had lived with his family (Shaw 2017: 116). *Murder Rap* echoes *Gloo Joo*'s urban working-class settings while its characters are similarly ripped away from the place they know as home. Both plays were shown at a time when the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher explicitly used immigration scares as a way of gaining popularity with the electorate, and the Conservatives' 1979 election manifesto promised to end persistent fears about levels of immigration and, perhaps most controversially, in an echo of Enoch Powell's sentiments expressed a decade earlier, it stated that non-white immigrants would be offered financial help to leave the country (Shaw 2017: 117).

*Gloo Joo* may be ambivalent as a text: as Shaw suggests, 'it could perhaps be "read" as a satirical critique of UK immigration policy, but it would be equally possible to see it as racist' (2017: 118). *Murder Rap* sits more firmly within an anti-racist discourse, thanks to the relationship which develops between Wallie and Ernest (Larrington Walker), the black British man Wallie ends up shooting after he finds out that not only does he have to move out of his flat but he also has to separate from his beloved dog. Ernest, or rather Ernest's black skin, becomes for Wallie the cause of all his misfortunes. After Ernest has recovered from his injuries he insists on meeting Wallie to understand his motivation for the shooting. Despite

Wallie's hostility (he calls him 'darkie' and 'chocolate') Ernest perseveres and the two end up meeting several times. By the end, while they remain far from friends, Wallie has at least stopped using racially offensive language and he even holds Ernest's hand when he loses his voice because of the stroke he's suffered. From someone defined by his skin colour, Ernest becomes an individual with a history, a family and hopes for the future. This is the outcome of Ernest's patience in the face of violence and racial abuse. In one poignant scene, he challenges Wallie's name-calling by relating the history of his surname (Woolfe):

Ernest: A couple of centuries ago my family was shipped from Bristol to Trinidad by slavers. These slavers were a family of Portuguese Sephardi Jews. Some of the slaves they kept for themselves and named them Woolfe. That's important for you to know I got a real name, that's how it has come about. How did you get your name?

Wallie: I don't know!

Each time Ernest meets Wallie he gets a chance to narrate his 'story', offering expositional detail about his character and historical context to the viewer. Their conversations take place first at the police station, then at the prison's visiting room, and finally at the hospital where Ernest sits by Wallie's bed: the camera stays tight on their faces, intensifying the impact of their difficult, uncomfortable interactions. The location scenes of the Brady House in East London where the story began now seem a world away.

The relationship between Wallie and Ernest is the antithesis of that between Jeff (also played by Larrington Walker) and Grace in *Waterloo Sunset*. The latter is from the start warm and friendly. Grace embraces the changes her neighbourhood has undergone and finds in Jeff a generosity and affection she misses from her own family. They drink and smoke together at Jeff's house, where Grace is staying, and at the pub. In contrast, Ernest and Wallie meet only at places of institutional authority or power (police station, prison, hospital), their relationship being less spontaneous and more 'clinical'. The two black characters are rather different too:

Jeff has embraced Rastafari as a form of cultural expression and political resistance whereas Ernest is disillusioned by politics. As he tells Wallie:

I was never a 'back to Africa' Rastafari man ... I don't want to become a black Marxist so that a white Marxist can tell me what to do. I don't want to eat peas and greens so that some Tory can tell me how nice it is to see an example of multiracial living. And I don't want to go back home, 'cos I'm home here.

What Ernest and Jeff have in common is that both, as second-generation black British, have felt the full force of racism in British society: they have suffered discrimination and have been physically attacked. What all four characters (Grace and Wallie too) have in common is the feeling of being dislocated for reasons beyond their control.

Identity issues of second-generation youth are also addressed in H.O. Nazareth and Horace Ové's *The Garland*. Raji (Tariq Yunus), his English wife Leela (Patricia Garwood) and their seventeen-year-old son Roy (Lyndam Gregory) have just moved from the suburb of Handsworth into Birmingham itself. Raji misses his community so he returns to Handsworth to do shopping and meet friends: Ové's direction never misses an opportunity to follow Raji as he walks down the high street, greeting and chatting with friends, and observing the social rituals and events of the community. The documentary feel of these sequences captures something of the vibrant Asian culture in this West Midlands suburb and its interactions with other cultures and communities.

In contrast with these colourful images of multicultural life in the West Midlands, the play addresses harsher realities: racial violence is acutely represented when Roy witnesses an attack on a young Asian man by three white youths, who will later verbally abuse him and attempt to physically hurt him. Roy's trauma is strikingly visualised in a scene in which he dreams of looking at himself in the mirror and seeing a face divided into black and white halves.

Violence takes different forms in Phillip Martin's *Gangsters*. The play's use of Birmingham's canals as a distribution network for illegal drugs serves on one level as an ironic reflection of the city's past as a distribution hub for goods from the empire. This was the first drama to show the brutal reality of an underworld that involved all races and a range of criminal activities – the smuggling of drugs and immigrants, prostitution and racketeering. Directed by Philip Saville and shot wholly on film, the play is closer in style to contemporary American urban crime movies than to any familiar British televisual aesthetic of the time, least of all that of *Play for Today* (Duguid and Liarou 2012: 152). We encounter the city in a series of car chases and fight scenes, and in night clubs, canals and car parks.

Birmingham's close neighbour, Coventry, is the setting of another *Play for Today*, *3 Minute Heroes*, written by Leslie Stewart. Broadcast in 1982, the play offers a rare fictional response to the late 1970s Two-Tone phenomenon, born in Coventry, and the youth culture surrounding it. Shot mostly on location, the play follows mixed-race Billy (Philip Freeman), who lives for Two-Tone music, and his white friend Adrian (Ian Davies) around the city's streets, pubs and public swimming pools. Other members of the group are Billy's girlfriend Lectric (Joanna McBride), Debbo (Valentina Mantoya), Rhoda (Beverley Tate), rude boy Elvis (Clarence Venson) and skinhead Boz (Keith Anderson). Ska runs through the soundtrack, which ranges from the Specials' 'Enjoy Yourself' to the New Romantic sound of the group Fashion.

As one later critic put it 'the play is closer to the box-ticking automatism of modern drama commissioning (Youth? Check. Music? Check. Race? Check.) than the writer-led tradition *Play for Today* had proudly upheld for so long'.<sup>5</sup> However, the play's heart is unquestionably in the right place, trying to give voice to the increasingly demonised inner city youth and to represent not just the rivalries but also the cultural exchanges between them. The play sets out its stall from the start: Lectric and Rhoda, a white and a black punk, admire

themselves in the mirror while preparing to go out. The camera stays on them for a moment; this is an image of punk youth culture without racial boundaries. The youth's intercultural and ethnic alliances are also shown to have shaped the city, its streets and public spaces, pubs and cafés. For example, two men (one of them is Boz) hand out British Movement leaflets to the young people queuing outside the General Wolfe pub to see a gig by Fashion. No-one seems interested in the leaflet, and when one lad challenges Boz, telling him 'it's bollocks!', the others all cheer and clap in agreement. The scene is not only a reminder of the splits within youth culture (for example the Oi! phenomenon and its links with far-right politics), it also serves as a testament to the central role music venues such as the General Wolfe played in uniting the city's youth, black and white.

A bit earlier Billy and Ian are wandering around the streets when Billy sees a Specials poster on a public wall. Tearing off a small piece, he declares: 'I'm gonna have some of this. This ought to be preserved, a monument'. Billy already feels nostalgic about that historic moment when the Specials were one of the first racially mixed bands in the UK with a music that aimed to transcend and defuse racial tensions. By the time the play was made (1982), Two Tone has become, for Billy, just another commodity: 'They bought it up, put it in a packet, sold it back to us. Black and white clothes for black and white kids'. As the two friends walk and talk, they leave behind a wall of torn-up old posters of which we can catch only a glimpse. In the light of Billy's comments, this is no longer an ordinary wall – it is the fabric of the city, laden with the histories of its culture, race and politics.

A sense of place is also very strongly conveyed in *A Hole in Babylon*, which dramatises the 1975 Spaghetti House Siege in Knightsbridge. The three men involved in the initial plan to rob the restaurant are Frank Davies (T-Bone Wilson), Wesley Dick (Archie Pool) and Anthony Monroe (Trevor Thomas), and Horace Ové tells their story by employing a form of drama documentary, with multiple dramatic flashbacks interspersed with archive

footage. The play has been widely discussed and researched, so I will focus here on those textual and intertextual elements which firmly root those three characters not only in London but in the historical moment of global anti-racist politics and the mobilisation of the second-generation black British youth.

The idea of home/homeland here is not of one place but dispersed and diasporic. Shaped by Black Power, it crosses borders and oceans to connect a black diaspora: the 'Black Atlantic', to use Paul Gilroy's term (1995). The three men plan what they will do with the money from the robbery: Frank, recently released from prison, wants to go to Zimbabwe to join the fight there, Wesley wants to go back to Tanzania and also give something to the Black Liberation Army, while Anthony dreams of setting up a school for black children in London and wants to study at a university in Nigeria. Shot on film, the play takes us to the London these three men know and inhabit. Ové himself remarked that he didn't want to make a film about a siege, but about the motivation of the gunmen, their lives and the reasons they did it. Before the filming started the director spent more than a year speaking to people who knew the three men and made himself familiar with the milieu in which they moved (Phillips 1979: 19).

For example, Wesley is a poet and one of the places he frequents is his local Afro-Asian centre and library: as Wesley opens the door we see a poster with details of a community screening of Ové's film *Pressure*. This is not merely an intertextual reference but a testament to an emerging militant black film culture. Wesley himself is increasingly radicalised as he is racially abused at work. Anthony, a medical student, has focused his efforts on a school for black children that he runs with other volunteers from the basement of a derelict house. 'Marcus Garvey School' is written in paint on the bin outside the house, and inside the walls are daubed with the symbols and colours of Rastafari. The room is crammed and run down. 'This is not a palace for a King', laments Anthony, referring to Haile Selassie,

Emperor of Ethiopia and central figure of the Rastafari movement, 'this is a hole in Babylon'. Anthony repeatedly failed to secure state funding for the school, and the rejection of his latest application devastates him. Frank, meanwhile, finds himself in a basement of a bookshop dedicated to black culture and art. He goes there to meet friends who use the basement to organise their political resistance and, as he enters, the camera ensures that Ousmane Sembene's novel *Xala* is in the frame. Frank tries to reconnect with friends and pull his life together again after having spent time in prison, where he suffered abuse from prison guards and inmates associated with the far-right.

These snippets of the three men's lives show how racialised structures are built into key institutions of British society, marginalising second-generation black youths. Frank, Anthony and Wesley do not remain passive, though, and their political awakening is evident from the pockets of black radical London they inhabit. Ové chose to shoot much of the play in and around Ladbroke Grove, an area which was, during the 1970s, inexorably linked to black political expression and struggle (Shaw 2015). Ové's choice of location would have struck a chord with those (black) audiences who would be aware of its political symbolism.

#### From Empire to Enoch

Enoch Powell's 'River of Blood' speech in 1968 cracked open the wounds of an already racially divided society and further radicalised both sides, the white far-right and the black nationalists. The legacy of his speech reverberates in several plays and is directly referenced in *Destiny*. Through the story of Dennis Turner (Colin Jeavons), the play deals with how and why the far-right National Front (fictionalised here as Nation Forward) was becoming a genuine political force in 1976-7. *Destiny* was broadcast 'just one day after Conservative leader of the opposition Margaret Thatcher made widely-reported comments on *This*

*Week* about how white communities felt “swamped” due to immigration’ (May 2017a). As the play’s writer David Edgar himself noted (ibid.), the Tories were fully prepared to articulate the kind of militant and exclusive national resentment that had hitherto been the preserve of the fascist fringe.

Adapted from Edgar’s original stage play, *Destiny* is a complex piece of storytelling spanning four decades, from the moment of India's independence in 1947 to a 1977 by-election in the fictional town of Taddley, west of Birmingham. We first meet Turner as a British army sergeant in India on the day of its independence in August 1947, when he’s tasked with clearing a room full of imperial spoils, including hunting trophies and a painting showing the putting down of the Indian mutiny. We meet him again in 1970, as a shopkeeper selling memorabilia in a West Midlands town, just as he learns that his property developer landlord has sold his shop and the building, along with the whole street. Devastated at the loss of business and livelihood, and feeling betrayed by his party, he joins a far-right group and ultimately stands as a candidate for Nation Forward, a party energised by Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech.

Turner is strikingly similar to Wallie in *Murder Rap*: both men feel evicted from their own country and unable to fight the bigger political or economic forces that have shaken their lives and beliefs to the core. All they can do is tear to pieces their political idols, as Wallie does to a photograph of Churchill, and Dennis to a poster with the message reading ‘Vote Conservative for a Better Tomorrow’ (while Churchill’s photograph remains visible behind him). It’s a class war disguised as a race war, and both Wallie and Turner project their grievances onto the most visible enemy, the immigrant.

Whereas in *Murder Rap* a real location – the council estate – becomes the site and source of conflict, in *Destiny* much of the grieving for a lost empire and dreaming of a Britain



restored to greatness takes place in the studio. As Tom May (2017b) convincingly argues, Mike Newell's 'predominantly studio aesthetic usually tends to reflect naturalism, though the picket-line scene stands out as minimalist'. The picket line of Asian factory workers is only implied: all we see are two of the Asian workers, Khera (Saeed Jaffrey) and Patel (Marc Zuber), meeting Labour candidate Bob Clifton (John Price) in a dark basement with a brick wall and a few posters, where they are reassured that the party will back their strike. Newell's direction often leaves scenes with the bare essentials: the characters debating their vision of the country. There are occasional political banners, posters and photographs, but ultimately the play relies on the power of the characters' arguments. For example, at Nation Forward headquarters, Cleaver (Iain Cuthbertson) and Maxwell (Joseph Blatchley) argue over the content of the speech Turner will deliver. Turner's views on linking immigrants with 'parasitic worms' are dismissed but they all talk about 'repatriation, ordered and compassionate'. The core of the disagreement is Maxwell's castigating of multinational corporations and businesses as the prime causes of immigration, a view too close to Marxism for Cleaver to accept. He eventually kicks Maxwell out of the party and initiates Turner into his more orthodox fascist notion that Jewish businessmen have taken over the world.

Splits occur within Labour too. When Khera's colleague Patel is arrested and threatened with deportation, he goes to find Clifton to ask for his support and advice but, with a by-election looming, Clifton gets cold feet (even as he sits enjoying a curry at an Indian restaurant): to offer such support, it appears, would risk alienating Labour's white supporters. Rifts occur at Conservative HQ too. Major Rolfe (Nigel Hawthorne), one of the military men in India at the play's start, is beaten by his Heathite rival Peter Crosby (David Robb) for the nomination as Tory candidate. Rolfe believes that socialism and 'wet' Toryism have betrayed the lower-middle classes. We later find him weeping over the coffin of his son, killed during an army patrol in Northern Ireland, in another bare room but containing some essential visual

symbols: the British flag and the painting, previously seen in the play's opening scene, depicting the crushing of the Indian Mutiny. 'The sun has set', Rolfe says, in a powerful monologue that poignantly brings together two stories of imperial greed and loss (India and Northern Ireland). The only difference is that for Rolfe this second loss is too close to home – emotionally and geographically – to bear.

The two characters whose lives are caught in, and fundamentally shaped by, all these political events are Turner and Khera. Despite their political differences, their journeys coincide, and, more crucially, their destinies are tragically intertwined: they are both pawns in a game of political power and are both ultimately betrayed by their respective parties. Turner's journey, like Khera's, begins in India and ends in 1977 when, after a promising election result (Nation Forward comes a close third), Cleaver and Turner meet merchant bankers Rolfe and Kershaw (Peter Jeffrey) hoping to get more funding. The meeting takes place in the hospitality room of the City of London merchant bank, and behind Turner we see, once again, the Indian Mutiny painting. Hearing the name of Rolfe's company, Turner realises that these are the people who forced him out of business in the first place. The same old imperial imagery (the painting) is there to disguise Britain's new capital-hungry face. Turner is left shell-shocked while Cleaver responds: 'It doesn't matter, that's in the past'.

Khera's journey is summed up in Cleaver's words: 'A slave that returns to haunt the empire's grave'. From a colonial subject and servant in India, he migrates to Birmingham and becomes a unionised, militant factory worker. Unlike Turner, he gets a chance to express his anger in one of the few instances when the camera ventures out of the studio. Khera is going down the stairs of a subway with his white colleague and comrade Paul (Paul Copley) when they are confronted by NF member Tony (David Beames) and three other thugs. Tony sneers 'Paul's pet monkey' and a fight breaks out. Worn down by years of racism, Khera snaps and attacks his abuser with a broken glass. As May (2017b) has noted, on stage, this fight had

been more dramatic, with crowds present and Paul being the one who hits back. Khera is given greater agency on television. He uses his own knife to threaten Tony, while uttering the telling dialogue that connotes Tony's pawn-like status: 'Tell me. Who do you think you are doing all this FOR?!' Perhaps the exact same thought crosses Turner's mind in that bankers' room where his bitter sense of injustice is so breezily dismissed.

Another play mostly set in the studio is Barrie Keeffe's *King*, the story of a man who, after a lifetime working on the railways in England, decides he wants to retire and return to Jamaica. Using the framework of *King Lear*, the play addresses the experiences and disillusionment of the Windrush generation as well as those of their children. Thomas Baptiste, who plays the titular Mr King, had for years campaigned for black actors' rights, putting pressure on Equity to urge casting director and producers to use black actors, regardless of their characters' race, colour or creed. Baptiste questioned why it should be difficult to accept a black actor's performance, as, say, *King Lear* on stage, when it might be perfectly acceptable on radio or on a disc (Pines 1992: 67).

Most of *King* takes place at the dinner table in the restaurant where Mr King has taken his daughters to celebrate his retirement. What is meant to be a joyous family gathering, however, soon turns into something far darker. King's unquestioning faith in the British state leaves one of his daughters, Susan (Ella Wilder), frustrated with his unwillingness to see that the image that he has created of England for all these years is a fantasy. Their argument comes to a head and King leaves the restaurant – and the studio space – which can no longer accommodate either the row or the fantasy.

The camera follows King out as he heads to a place he knows very well, the place at which he's worked for 35 years, the railway station and surrounding yard. This is where his transformation takes place: until now an obedient and always composed man, King bursts

into tears of anger, bitterness and sorrow. His sense of betrayal by his daughter has left him devastated and has brought to the surface his fury at the injustices and racism he's seen and endured all this time. This whole scene, filmed on location, not only disrupts what had looked like a chamber piece, it also connects King's different lives and experiences. In fact, the play begins and ends with still images from Pathé newsreels of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948. The hopeful faces of the West Indian men in these newsreels contrast sharply with King's breakdown at the railway station almost 35 years later. King decides to leave on the railway line the watch given to him as a retirement present, lamenting: 'A lifetime smashed into pieces in a millionth of a second, a waste ... People kill themselves on train lines, they get crushed to death.' This is a dark moment, and, in a flood of tears, King can barely stand, while the station lights blind him, almost like interrogation lights, putting under the spotlight lives that for a long time had been pushed to the margins of British society. Tony Smith's direction and the combination of film and studio capture and frame King's 35-year physical and emotional journey. *King* is another play in which generational divisions acutely express the pace of change in postwar Britain. Back at home, King's other daughter, Linda (Josette Simon), offers him no solace: she calls him 'Uncle Tom' and, in another powerful outburst, she cries: 'The only thing you taught me was never to be humble like you! When they called me nigger, I wanted you to react.' This is 1984, and the journey of a new black British generation has already begun.

As noted earlier, the Powellite discourse on immigration is echoed in most of the plays analysed here. In particular, race became inextricably linked with 'repatriation' in debates on immigration in the 1970s and this is reflected in some of the plays through stories of deportation. For example, the deportation of Patel in *Destiny* becomes a source of political friction and division. The most dramatically powerful deportation story takes place in *The Garland*. After divorcing his first wife, Mohammed Huq (Albert Moses), an old Handsworth

friend of Raji's, determines to marry again. His family has found him a bride, Nadira (Katy Mirza), who travels from Bangladesh to the UK for the first time, with no knowledge of English. The marriage is still young when his newly pregnant wife is arrested by immigration officials. Mohammed is devastated to discover that she is to be deported since his Islamic divorce is not recognised under UK law, making his remarriage illegal. The scenes of immigration officials arresting a bewildered and powerless Nadira and taking her to prison, and the subsequent scene of her deportation, bring home the violence of 'repatriation' and its devastating effects on the families it rips apart. With support from Raji and Leela, a desperate Mohammed pursues every possible legal route to halt the deportation. As the distraught Nadira is escorted to the plane, she throws away her wedding garland, crying: 'Put it as a wreath on my grave'. Mohammed and his family, in floods of tears, press themselves against the terminal window to catch a last glimpse of Nadira as she is taken away. For Raji's English wife Leela, this whole experience has laid bare the injustice and inhumanity of such immigration policies. Likewise, it would have been a completely new and shocking spectacle for most contemporary viewers who would be unlikely to have witnessed anything like such a realistic representation in any previous TV drama. Shot on location, these scenes reinforce the authenticity of their situations while capturing something of the characters' emotional trauma and despair.

There are striking similarities to the representation of another deportation in *Gangsters*. Tariq Yunus, who plays Raji in *The Garland*, appears in *Gangsters* as Jashir, who is deported after failing to pay protection money to the racketeers, leaving his wife and children bereft in England. In contrast with *The Garland*, the emotional pitch in the scene of the family separation is altogether more restrained, but the effect is, if anything, even more distressing for the viewer. Jashir's family are waving goodbye behind the same airport terminal window as if they will soon see him again: perhaps that's even what they are told.

But viewers have already been made aware of the brutal reality of the family's life in earlier scenes when we see them move from place to place in a desperate effort to keep ahead of the racketeers. The story of Jashir's family runs almost in parallel with the story of John Kline (Maurice Colbourne), one of the play's two main protagonists who is constantly on the move too, running away from his old enemies. Both end up at the airport, but while Kline walks away a free man (he's killed his old enemy), Jashir has lost everything, his freedom and his family.

There is a brutality, too, in the depiction of illegal immigration rackets. We witness immigrants smuggled into Britain in trunks, while the dead body of a black stripper, Dinah (Tania Rogers), is also 'repatriated' in a poignant scene in which her parents await the departure of her coffin. *Gangsters* doesn't shy away either from the complex politics of such rackets. The wealthy Pakistani Rafiq (Saeed Jaffrey) controls one of them and he, in turn, takes his orders from an English underworld baron, Ozzie Rawlinson (played by *Gangsters*' writer Philip Martin). Later on, during the first series that followed the original Play for Today, we find out that the money that Asians pay to be smuggled into the UK by Rafiq's operation goes to fund the campaign an extreme right-wing, anti-immigration party. From Rafiq's mansion to Jashir and his family's dilapidated bedsit, and from the lively Bollywood cinema-going culture of Birmingham to racketeering money changing hands in the city's streets in broad daylight, *Gangsters* depicts a multitude of urban worlds and cultures, resisting any easy labelling of ethnic identity.

The only one of these plays to be set largely abroad, Leon Griffiths' witty and deceptive *A Passage to England*, turns the theme of illegal immigration on its head. Presented as a comedy, the play is striking for the way it explores such a dark theme with a heavy dose of irony. Described at the time as 'deliciously entertaining, fantasising on what is normally a grim theme', an 'exquisitely balanced game of bluff and counter-bluff' and 'a first-class play

which played some neat tricks on preconceived notions’, the play follows three Indians, Anand (another role for Tariq Yunus), his cousin and sick uncle as they try to arrange illegal entry to England on a fishing boat via Amsterdam.<sup>6</sup> The boat’s English skipper, Onslow (Colin Welland), is apparently sympathetic to their plight and prepared to take them on. A deal is struck but the question of whether the two parties can trust each other remains. ‘You and I are simply two of a kind’, Anand tells Onslow, and what they both desire is to make the maximum possible financial profit: Onslow by getting rid of his partner and taking his share of the money, and Anand and his partners by deceiving the Englishman into believing that they need him but eventually ripping him off. The story of the sick uncle who dreams of going to the ‘land of fair play and the village green’ is, it transpires, a well-orchestrated con, and one that plays havoc with familiar imperial and post-imperial narratives of the subservient, obedient and grateful colonial subject. The play employs settings often associated with the liminality of the migrant experience – the action is mostly filmed around the port and on the boat – only to present at the end the three Indian characters leaving the port in their car, all dressed to the nines and revelling in their victory. ‘Contentment with his place in life is the firm basis of the Indian character. This quality is indeed a credit to his race’, adds the Asian narrator (another unusual device of the piece), leaving viewers to decide for themselves exactly where the play’s boundaries between irony, self-sarcasm and political critique lie.

### Conclusion

The collection of dramas discussed here expands the social canvas of representations of black and Asian identity and culture in two principal, interrelated ways. First, they use location shooting to witness and comment on the pace and nature of change in some of England’s urban centres. The physical spaces that, in many cases, are represented on the TV screen for the first time depict the city as a threatening and unwelcoming place for black and Asian

communities. From *Waterloo Sunset* to *Murder Rap*, from *Gangsters* to *The Garland*, scenes of racial attacks and violence on city streets speak acutely to the everyday experiences of these communities. *3 Minute Heroes* and *A Hole in Babylon* offer an alternative to this by showing urban spaces of intercultural exchange and ethnic alliances (Coventry and its music scene) and pockets of black resistance and power (Ové's black radical London).

Second, the nature of change is often represented in the form of metaphorical (political, psychological) and physical journeys, sometimes coerced. Characters endure their condition and search for cultural space, and this is explored through the lens of the legacy of the British Empire. Take, for example, *Destiny*: for two of the main characters, Turner and Khera, their journeys are both physical (from India to London) and psychological (from passive imperial subject to political radical). Similarly, *Waterloo Sunset*'s Grace and Jeff, *Murder Rap*'s Wallie and Ernest and *A Hole in Babylon*'s Frank, Wesley and Anthony are all experiencing a certain kind of physical and cultural dislocation as the new post-imperial world within which they find themselves exposes the myths of belonging to the British nation. Dramatically, more extreme examples of such dislocation are provided in the way in which deportation is represented in *Gangsters*, *The Garland* and *Destiny*, as well as in the story of King, whose emotional breakdown splits apart his family and his whole world. These psychological and emotional journeys are represented in scenes that effectively combine the immediacy of real locations with the intimacy of interior spaces. It is in the pub, the kitchen, the basement or the hospital ward where uncomfortable conversations about racism and Britain's post-imperial hangover take place. In this sense, the plays significantly expand the social and cultural representations of race and diversity as seen on television up to that point, contributing to the discursive spaces that Play for Today series offered to its viewers. With Play for Today the single play was already succumbing to an era of cost-effectiveness (Gardner and Wyver 1983), and yet the plays discussed here are largely distinctive and depart



from the racialised narratives of other programming of their era – whether sitcoms, news or light entertainment. Their format as single pieces would help to elevate them in the schedule and to invite audiences to see them as television events.

After Play for Today and the single play came the TV film and a renewed interest in black and Asian identities and cultures. Channel 4 and Film on Four supported groundbreaking TV films such as Hanif Kureishi/Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), which first had a cinematic release, and Meera Syal/Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) as well as the ACTT Workshop Declaration that inaugurated a new chapter in the history of black British cinema, with the formation of Black Audio Film Collective, Retake and Sankofa. Both this rich tradition of TV single films and the developments in black British cinema in the 1980s and 1990s are important contexts for Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* (2020), a series of five self-contained films for the BBC which carries uncanny echoes of the plays explored here, both in the themes and issues represented (drama based on real events and stories about institutional racism in the police and education), and in its format: stand-alone pieces whose screening in the context of Black Lives Matter and a global pandemic felt like a national television event. The legacy of Play for Today lives on.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Obi Egbuna's play see John Wyver's blog piece available at <https://www.illuminationsmedia.co.uk/earl-cameron-and-a-lost-play/>

<sup>2</sup> *Radio Times*, 29 January-4 February 1972, p.42.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Kerrigan, 'The Lost Plays for Today we'll never see', available at <https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lost-play-todays-well-never-see>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Tara Prem, available at

<https://womensfilmtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/2013/11/30/tara-prem-pioneer-of-british-multicultural-tv-drama/>

<sup>5</sup> Play for Today: *3 Minute Heroes*. Review available at <https://www.tvcream.co.uk/telly/play-for-today/3-minute-heroes/>

<sup>6</sup> *Radio Times*, 20-26 August 1977, p. 47. Quotes are taken from the *Morning Star*, *Daily Express* and *The Sunday Times* on the occasion of the play's repeat showing on 25 August.

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