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“Red Taffeta Under Tweed”: The Meaning of Colour in Post-War Clothes’.

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Introduction: The Naming of Colours

The British Colour Council was established in 1930 and was responsible for the standardisation, naming and coding of colour in the British Empire; or, as it was put in 1949: ‘The placing of colour determination for the British Empire in British hands...’ (British Colour Council 1949, xi). The first *Dictionary of Colour Standards* was issued in 1934 and new editions were produced regularly as more colours were added to the range. In the second edition, published in 1951, twenty additional colours were added and took their place alongside the other swatches, such as ‘Kenya Red’, - a colour that had been introduced in 1935 on the occasion of the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Kent, and so named because it reminded them of the soil of Kenya (figure 1). Close to ‘Kenya Red’ was ‘Nigger Brown’, a colour that continued to be included in the *Dictionary* into the 1950s, in spite of the introduction in 1934 of ‘African Brown’, which, it was conceded, was: ‘...a more desirable name for the colour standardised in 1934 as Nigger Black; it is often preferred to a “dead black”.’ (1949, 1. See British Colour Council 1951, 40). This is the world of colour as it is given meaning in the historical conjuncture of post-war Britain. The British Colour Council stated that its colour names were derived in three ways: from sensations in nature, for example, cherry red; from colours associated with period styles, for example, Wedgwood blue; and from names of the original pigments, for example, yellow ochre. So how is ‘Nigger Brown’ named and how is it comprehended? What did it mean to purchase the latest Whipcord coat in ‘Nigger’, as advertised in *Woman’s Friend and Glamour* in 1951? The disturbing terminology of the Colour Council, with its nonchalant adoption of the geo-

politics of empire, is an important reminder of the ways in which the mechanics of hue and the ideologies of race were imbricated in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. To speak of colour was to invoke a symbolic system in which racial identities were constructed not only through skin colour but also through the languages of chromatics, clothes, culture and the body.

The aim of this article is to examine the meanings and valences of colour in post-war Britain and to understand how systems of chromatic colour and of racial colour were mapped onto and informed each other. How did the naming of colours established by the British Colour Council and the popular comprehension of hues frame the experiences of migration from the late-1940s, both for the white nation and for migrants from the Caribbean? Colour, it will be argued, is a discourse of race, skin, tone and empire; a complex set of interweaving beliefs and images that this article will begin to prise apart. Beginning with an overview of ideas concerning colour and the emergence of a modern nation in the post-war years, the argument will move on to a case-study of the 1959 British film, *Sapphire* and its construction of racial identities through the semantics of hue, dress and appearance. It will go on to examine how these ideas were more widely disseminated and attached to black migrants within a range of discourses, including social studies and popular psychology, journalism, and through visual media, such as caricature. Colour in Britain after the war: bright; gay; the future; dangerous; wayward; citrus yellow; African brown; Kenya red; colour range; colour bar.

The history of Britain in the first decade following the end of World War II can be understood in terms of a discourse on greyness and absence of colour in the years immediately after the war and the emergence of colour as the language of modernity and reconstruction. This teleology was far from being a smooth transition from greyscale to

chromatic luminosity, however; colour was strange, fascinating and powerful. It could so easily become unruly and dangerous and the post-war nation needed to be taught how to use it. Loss of colour was a metaphor for all that was wrong with the post-war settlement; rather than celebrating the poetics of chiaroscuro and atmospheric contrast, grey became a symbol of stasis, of a ruined society and a government that was failing to modernise and a country that was bogged down in the past. For British painter, poet and *provocateur*, Wyndham Lewis, the grey rot of London was a visual expression of the debt-laden over-regulation of the Labour Government and, writing in 1951, in the year of the Festival of Britain, it became the focus for one late 'blast': '...a monstrous derelict of a city, built upon a bog and cursed with world-famous fogs: every house in it has a crack from the blast of a bomb and dies at last of chronic dry rot.' (Lewis 1951, 91)

Within this historiography the Festival of Britain represents a turning point, when the mist lifted and colour returned. So it was described by a number of commentators and remembered by many of those who visited the site. Writing in the *Listener* in the autumn of 1951, shortly after the South Bank Festival site had closed, Harold Nicolson recalled that the Festival had been organised: 'to dissipate the gloom that hung like a pea-soup above the heads of the generation of 1951' and had transformed the area, which had been: '...coloured emerald, orange, purple, pink and scarlet...' (Nicolson 1951, 733). With the defeat of the Labour government, however, and a new Conservative government elected just weeks after the closure of the South Bank, Festival colour was far from guaranteed. Reconstruction had barely started and the vivid colours of the South Bank might so easily fade back into grey. By the summer of 1952 the journalist and author Marghanita Laski was asking readers of the *Observer* whether they remembered the colour, optimism and gaiety of the Festival: 'Do you remember the colours that glared across the river, olive and scarlet

and yellow and blue...dabs of pure colour such as we didn't know we had always hungered for until at last they were there?' (Laski 1952, 4) The need for colour, she suggests, is basic and physical; it is a hunger for something that, like food and clothes, had been rationed during the war years and now that people had tasted it again, the fear is that it could disappear as swiftly as it had reappeared in the summer of 1951.

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War Britain's hold on colour was uncertain; the yearning, the appetite, for colour was expressed over and over again, but its social impact was less clear. Colour was the language of the project of modernisation but it was as though the knowledge of colour had been forgotten and needed to be reintroduced into the national fabric and psyche. Moreover, like other drives and appetites, the taste for colour was fraught with tensions and problems. It was ambiguous and over-determined and might require restraint, as much as indulgence. In November 1946, with paper rationing still in place, the illustrated weekly paper *Picture Post* introduced a colour middle section, in a bid to maintain its record wartime circulation figures. The piece was a photographic look at the Royal Rooms at Windsor Castle and to this extent the paper conformed to what would become a convention of depicting royalty in colour. To promote this important issue the *Post* ran a cover announcing in bold white lettering against a red ground: 'Colour Again', with a greyscale photograph of a black woman in a *décolleté* top, against a dark background, apparently modelling for a sketch. (*Picture Post* 1946, cover) 'Colour Again'; the colour of royal Windsor or the colour of the skin of the woman on the cover? We cannot reconstruct the editorial discussions that led to the selection of this cover and the overlaying of the colourful interiors of Windsor with the colour of race. This ambiguity, however, pinpoints precisely the question of colour in post-war Britain. Colour was never just colour, it was also always something else, something

more than simple hue or shade. Colour again; it was not so much a question of the return of colour, however, for colour had always been there, as the emergence of a new and different colour world in the late-1940s and 1950s, in which colour took on greater meaning than ever before.

This article tracks these debates about colour through its relationships to dress and race in the post-war period from 1948 to the end of the 1950s. In its concentration on this cluster of discourses it is a contribution to the growing literature on diasporic style narratives, the most recent of which is Carol Tulloch's excellent study *The Birth of Cool* (2015; see also 2002 and 2010a), in which she expands her previous theoretical and historical examination of the ways in which the *Windrush* generation of migrants from the British colonies and commonwealth defined their identities through their self-fashioning. Drawing on her personal archive and that of Dr Beryl Gilroy (whose sense of sartorial presence and difference is discussed later in this article), Tulloch traces how black style was able to articulate many aspects of the experience of migration, including excitement, assertion and professionalism. This paper considers how this discourse and the performance of post-war black style were drawn into prevailing white British perceptions of respectability and appearance, inflected through a chromatic register, a semiotics of colour, that was put in place in the 1930s, compounded during wartime and that withstood the vicissitudes of austerity and the end of rationing. While austerity and recovery is one lens with which to consider the history of post-war dress and clothing, this article will draw on a range of cultural forms in order to argue that it is a history that was also, always, written through the particular and powerful discourses of race, colour and migration.

*Sapphire: A Narrative of Colour*

A young white woman's body is thrown roughly onto a bed of dry brown leaves; the camera zooms in on her face and shoulders, as the title of the film appears on the screen in vibrant red letters. These are the opening shots of a British film called *Sapphire*, based on an original story and screenplay by Janet Green. Released in 1959, it was shot in Eastmancolor, directed by Basil Dearden and was voted 'Best British Film' of the year by the British Film Academy. As far as genre is concerned, *Sapphire* is a murder mystery, wrapped into a 'colour bar problem picture' (*Monthly Film Bulletin* 1959; see also Hill 1985; 1986, 83-9; Tarr 1985; Young 1996, 84-101); the mystery that the film eventually unravels, however, is not simply the identity of the murderer but, more importantly, the true identity of the victim.

The corpse is discovered the following morning by children walking with their mother on Hampstead Heath (figure 2). The police are called and can find only one clue to the victim's identity, a handkerchief embroidered with the letter 'S'. The victim's clothes are taken to the police station in a box where Superintendent Hazard and his assistant, Detective Inspector Learoyd, look through them for clues to the young woman's identity: a brown pleated skirt; a warm coat; sensible brown shoes and camel-coloured thick socks (figure 3). 'Nice sensible things', Learoyd suggests. But then Hazard pulls out another item, a red petticoat, which calls into question all their previous assumptions about the murder victim; 'Don't quite go together do they?' he observes. The semantic disjuncture between the two styles of clothing: the sensible, tweedy outer clothes and the bright, frivolous underclothing belongs to a social language of dress that was developed in the nineteenth century; in the post-war, colour bar years, however, this language was honed and mapped onto a language of race and colour, to become a key register of racial identity and difference.<sup>1</sup>



The detectives discover that the girl's name was Sapphire and that she was a student at the Royal Academy of Music; they also find out that she had a boyfriend, David Harris, a talented architecture student who has recently been awarded a scholarship at a European university. They visit Sapphire's rented room; it is messy and Hazard finds a locked drawer. He breaks into it and discovers that it is full of colourful, frilly petticoats, decorated stockings and red dancing shoes; the importance of this moment is reinforced by Philip Green's musical score, with a 'sting' punctuating the opening of the drawer, and a slinky saxophone riff played during the discovery of the clothes (figure 4). The opening of the drawer and the revelation of its secrets represents the uncovering of the truth of Sapphire's identity. In its review the *Daily Express* described the film as a 'psychological striptease', and as the detectives rifle through the victim's underclothes, the voyeurism of the investigation is as uncomfortable as it is inescapable (Mosley 1959). A torn photograph also found in her room shows Sapphire dancing, although the figure of her dance partner is missing.

Back at the police station the police meet Sapphire's brother, Doctor Robbins, who has arrived from Birmingham. Another musical punch prepares us for the shock that Doctor Robbins is black. He explains that their father was a white doctor and their mother was a singer, 'black as iron'. Because Sapphire looked white she was able to 'pass' for white and lived a double life; the contradiction which had been implied by the discovery of her clothes, is now resolved by the identity of her brother. Meanwhile, an autopsy has revealed that Sapphire was three months pregnant; with her identity uncovered Learoyd now assumes that the baby 'could be anybody's.' The detectives visit her boyfriend's home; he tells them that he knew she was 'coloured' and about the pregnancy. A local policeman also tells Hazard that David's father is very bigoted and that his sister, Mildred, is unhappily married to a merchant seaman who never seems to come home on leave.

The Harris's home is grey (figure 5). The walls, ceilings, doors, curtains and furniture are all muted shades of grey. This is the full British Colour Council grey range: dove grey; battleship grey; charcoal grey etc. Everything in the Harris's world is grey; streets are dull and shrouded in mist and even the tin labels in the grocery shop are black and white. This establishes the two colour worlds of the film; the reds and purples of the black Sapphire and the greys and neutrals of the white Sapphire. This colour coding was a deliberate feature of Dearden's direction. In an interview with *Kinematograph Weekly*, shortly before the release of the film, he explained how the daylight location shots and sets had been designed and lit to accent sombre winter colours. 'My idea', said Dearden, 'is to throw all this into contrast with the sudden splashes of colour produced by the coloured people themselves. The things they wear, the things they carry, their whole personality...I hope to bring something of this contrast to the screen.' (1958: 15) The film uses colour to signify race. Sapphire's true and essential racial identity is first suggested by the colour and style of her clothing, and is reinforced by her love of dancing and music.

With their new information, Hazard looks again at the clothes found on Sapphire's body, observing: 'Red taffeta under a tweed skirt', and Learoyd confirms: 'Yes, that's the black under the white alright'. The police visit Babette's in Shaftesbury Avenue which caters: 'for girls who like flashy, pretty underwear.'<sup>2</sup> The interior of the lingerie shop is the first infusion of colour – pinks and reds – in the otherwise grey London landscape. An assistant remembers Sapphire, who came to the shop accompanied by 'a great big coloured chap'. For Hazard, this is all revealing 'the other side of the picture' – the black side of Sapphire's white masquerade.

The investigation takes Hazard and Learoyd to the clubs and meeting places of black Londoners. They visit the International Club, a social club for immigrants of all nationalities,

and the Tulip Club 'a dive in Shepherds Bush'. Tulips is a jazz club frequented by black guests and 'lilyskins', black girls who look white. Race is again installed through colour and through music. The owner of the club assures the detectives that the racial identity of the 'passing' women is revealed when they hear the sound of the bongos and, at this point, the camera cuts to the tapping feet of a pale-skinned woman sitting at the bar. Learoyd looks at her feet and then his gaze moves up to her rapturous face and there follows a frenetic sequence of shots as the camera cuts between dancers, bongos, and finally the legs and thighs exposed by a swirling skirt. The women may appear white but their race makes it impossible to resist tapping their feet and dancing wildly to the 'black' jazz music.

Meanwhile, Hazard continues to check David's alibi, which is beginning to crack. He visits the Harrises in their grey home and tells the family that he has asked Dr Robbins to join them; Mildred protests that she does not want him in her house. When he arrives Hazard passes him a doll; the camera cuts from the white doll in his black hands to Mildred's increasingly agonized face. Within moments she is unable to watch any longer and cries: 'Get him out...[I] don't want his hands on my kids' toys.' Mildred confesses that on the afternoon of her murder, Sapphire had come to her grocery shop and taunted her about the race of her baby; fuelled with a hatred of black people and, it is implied, by frustrated desire, she reveals herself to be the murderer.

*Sapphire* builds the criminal investigation around the clues offered by colour and clothes as signifiers of race and sexuality. The original poster and publicity shots played on the contrast between the 'two' Sapphires: white, tweedy student and scarlet, dancing black woman (figure 6). Although the film was intended to expose the racial prejudices within the white nation, its liberal conscience is undermined by its dependence on a simplistic notion of racial difference, drawn through the visual discourses of colour, race and dress. The grey

world of the racist white population is contrasted to the colour world of the black immigrant population. As the police investigate Sapphire's murder, they follow up clues that lead to the black community in clubs, slum housing and gambling dens. Many of the black male characters are violent criminals, thieves and gamblers and, as the critic for the *Daily Worker*, Nina Hibbin, wryly observed, rather being a critique of the colour bar: '[the film] is perilously near to becoming a justification.' (cited in Bourne 2001, 195)

Moreover, Sapphire is an absence in the film, seen only as a figure in a photograph and through the clues offered by her clothing. There is no psychological depth or complexity to this black woman and her motivation to 'pass' as a white woman. Her decision to drain herself of colour and step into the grey world of the Harrises, is simply assumed rather than explored in any depth. Why would she not prefer to escape the colour bar of white landladies and the racial prejudice of the white community? The film poses this as a statement of fact, rather than a question of choice, compulsion and competing possibilities. And yet, there are passages and elements in the film – overlooked, perhaps, by the filmmakers themselves – that begin to point to the complexities of this phenomenon. For example, the presence of the 'lilyskins' in Tulips Bar, the return to a black community of these women who are passing as white, suggests that something important is also lost in the act of racial passing. In a fine recent study of racial passing in American society, Allyson Hobbs has explored the complex emotional experiences of black people who choose this kind of social exile. Describing the practice as a 'risky business' (Hobbs 2014, 5; see also Lahiri 2003 and Romano 2016), she argues that adopting a clandestine racial identity brings with it advantages and disadvantages, gains and losses:

Without a doubt, benefits accrued to these new white identities. But a more complex understanding of this practice [passing] requires a reckoning with

the loss, alienation, and isolation that accompanied, and often outweighed, its rewards. (Hobbs 2014, 6)

The methodological imperative of studying the history of racial passing, of crossing the 'permeable border of black and white' (Hobbs 2014, 8), for Hobbs, is that it reveals the historically and socially constructed, the socially contingent nature of race. It begins to highlight the elements *other* than skin colour, such as location, speech, dress, gesture, that construct racial identities and identification. Perhaps this is what the film also demonstrates. Sapphire's resourceful performance shows her understanding of the signs of white female respectability; the details of fabric, colour, design that speak the elements of white racial identity at that time. But Sapphire's locked drawer, with its sartorial and racial secrets, unravels her racial posturing, suggesting that race identity is inescapable and, that try as she might, Sapphire cannot fully escape her true racial nature. Finally, within this framework, Mildred Harris's murder of Sapphire may be understood as an act that symbolically seals, at least momentarily, the porous and traversable racial boundary between black and white.

A novel of the film was published shortly after its release, which 'fills' and elaborates many of the visual signs of the film, such as the details of clothes. In the novel, when Hazard and Learoyd arrive at the murder scene on Hampstead Heath, they notice that the clothes on the body do not include gloves. This becomes an additional clue for the sharp superintendent:

Subconsciously [Hazard] glanced round the crowd and saw that every woman there wore gloves – tan cape, black suede, cotton, nylon, plain woollen, coloured woollen – as many kinds as there were women. Only the hands of the dark-haired Unknown...were deprived of any protection from the chill morning air...(Cousins 1959, 11)<sup>3</sup>

This moment is not part of the film, however viewers had seen these decorous clothes on Hampstead Heath, in the attire of the mother accompanying the children who find Sapphire's body (figure 2). She is wearing a well-coordinated outfit of grey overcoat, yellow woollen scarf, brown leather court shoes and matching handbag and gloves. The novel spots a clue that Hazard overlooks in the film; Sapphire may seem to be dressed properly in her brown tweed outfit but she has no gloves and so her racial masquerade, which is so nearly perfect, is undone. In post-war Britain, clothes and colour were two aspects of a visual language of racial difference. It marked out black men and women as strange and as strangers to the prevailing customs of dress and appearance.

#### Migration: Colour, Clothes and Racial Identity

From the moment the migrant arrived in Britain their physical appearance became the subject of an investigative gaze, a 'psychological striptease' that peeled away the layers of dress to reveal difference. The 1948 British Nationality Act was passed by Clement Attlee's Labour Government, in the immediate and pressing contexts of decolonization and national labour shortages (see Paul 1995; 1997; 2001; Hansen 2000; Schwarz 1999).<sup>4</sup> The Act introduced an extremely expansive definition of British citizenship, providing that all residents of the British Empire and Commonwealth should be recognized as British citizens, enjoying equal rights and privileges. The Government made no distinction between its own citizens born within the United Kingdom and those born, for example, in Australia, New Zealand or the West Indies; all were equally entitled to live and work in Britain. The Act also marked a shift in the ways in which colonial relations were experienced and represented, and a growing perception within white Britain of colour as a social, political and cultural problem, ultimately leading to the retraction of these rights in the 1962 Commonwealth

Immigrants Act. The period from 1948 to 1962 is thus a distinct and key period within post-war history, which inflects and reshapes other periodisations such as 'austerity' or 'affluence' through the ideologies of race and colour, and which continues to have relevance within contemporary Britain.

There was already a significant and established colonial community in Britain before the outbreak of the Second World War. Although the greatest numbers of immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century and before 1939 were Jews from Eastern Europe, for centuries migrants from the British colonial territories had settled in seaports such as Cardiff and Liverpool and in major cities such as Manchester and London.<sup>5</sup> During the inter-war period concern had been expressed about anti-social behaviour in some of these communities; the lack of family life and the growing numbers of mixed race children. With the outbreak of war, however, these eugenicist arguments were eclipsed by the need to recruit soldiers from the colonies and although most returned to their homes in 1945, a number of West Indian ex-servicemen used their demobilisation payments to settle in Britain (Paul 1997, 113). So, by the passing of the 1948 Act, there was both an historic and a recent black colonial community in Great Britain; settled mostly in urban centres and around seaports, they were part of the economic and social life of the nation and although the numbers may not have been substantial, their presence was part of the fabric of the country and had already triggered some of the debates concerning racial difference and the purity of the white nation that were to cohere in the language of the 'colour bar' in post-war Britain (see Schwarz 1996a; 1996b; 1999).

The arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks from the West Indies on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1948 plays a pivotal role in both mainstream and subaltern histories of multi-racial Britain. The provisions of the British Nationality Act did not come into effect until 1 January

1949 and thus by defining the four hundred and ninety two *Windrush* migrants as ‘Jamaican unemployed’, the Labour Cabinet immediately placed them outside the prevailing legal categories of UK citizenship; temporary housing was provided in a disused air raid shelter in south London, basic comforts that were intended to discourage further unskilled colonial migration. The arrival of the *Windrush* was given extensive coverage in the British newspapers and on newsreels and there was clearly also concern within the Government about the possible scale of colonial immigration. In 1948 the Ministry of Labour expressed concern that ‘coloured colonials’ would be: ‘...brought in for a permanent absorption into our own population.’ (Paul 1997, 125). Within a few years of the end of the war, the nation was being imagined as white and unified – our own – and the colonial migrant as a dangerous intruder. Immigration addressed the problems of labour shortages and the empty bombed landscapes of post-war Britain, but it filled those vacancies with the problem of colour.

In the experience and narration of colonial migration clothes mattered – whether handmade, purchased on vouchers, or off the ration – they mattered to the migrant and to the white population; and never more than in the initial encounter as passengers arrived at ports and railway stations and made their first impressions. There is a profound emotional power to clothes and appearance in this context; they express hopes and dreams, fears and prejudices, the intractability of difference and the possibility of assimilation. Just such a moment is represented in the *Picture Post* article ‘Thirty Thousand Colour Problems’, written by Hilde Marchant, with photographs by Haywood Magee and published in June 1956 (figure 7). Magee’s photographs evoke both the numbers of people arriving and they depict the loneliness and apprehension, the excitement and expectations of the individual migrant. In the largest picture on the double-page spread, the ‘newest boatload’ is shown in



the customs hall, which is packed with people and their belongings. Men, women and children mill around, some women sit, and all wait. The luggage is varied: holdalls, suitcases and many decorated straw baskets, all full and, in some cases, brimming. The people are smart and formally dressed; the men in suits and ties and hats and the women in pretty dresses, tailored coats and hats. They are dressed as respectable citizens rather than as passengers from a long and uncomfortable sea journey. A caption describes the women's clothes as a sign of their naïve unfamiliarity with their destination: 'Many young women arrive alone, some in woollen clothes prepared for a British summer, others in cotton dresses fit only for a tropical sun.' (Marchant 1956: 28)

Stuart Hall reads the formality and respectability of the migrants' clothing as a poignant sign of their hopes and ambitions and their desire to make a good impression:

Jamaicans travelled – as they went to Church, or to visit their relatives – in their 'Sunday best'; the best things you had in the wardrobe. They were coming to a new place. The clothes are those of someone determined to make a mark, make an impression on where they are going. Their formality is a sign of their self-respect...The angle of the hats is universally jaunty: cocky. Already there is *style*. (Hall 1985: 4)

Hall's reading finds something that is in the photographs that photographer and journalist choose to overlook. Where Marchant sees the clothes in the terms of white Britain's stereotyped images of the migrant – a stranger and a potential problem – and cannot perceive them in any other way, least of all from the perspective of the migrant, Hall sees style, a form of self-presentation that assumes a social and political significance.

Getty Images now owns the licensing rights to the out-takes taken during the same photographic shoot, but not included in the article. They are as arresting and powerful as

the published photographs, some are extraordinary. A young woman with her suitcases at Victoria Station; pretty, neat, she turns to the camera, the creases in the back of her dark coat, the photographic *punctum* – the piercing detail - that tell the story of her long journey (figure 8; Barthes 2000: 25-8). A couple, seated side by side in a train; they turn towards each other, they hold each other's gaze and smile (figure 9). It is a deeply moving interaction; too intimate, perhaps, for publication. There are papers in his shirt pocket, an envelope, perhaps with an address and on the table in front of them the familiar form of a British passport. They are British citizens, they have a right to be in England, on that train; their presence in the photograph and in that historic conjuncture commands the viewer's attention and feeling.

The importance of looking respectable and making an impression recurs frequently in the memories of those who came to Britain from the West Indies in the years following the 1948 Act. Women in the West Indies bought and made outfits, specifically for travelling:

I bought a whole outfit. I want shoes. I want to look like somebody.

When I was leaving [Barbados], I got a tailor to make a nice jacket, and I made a skirt, so I had a nice outfit. And when I came to Victoria my brother bought me a lovely red coat, fitted one. And I was this pretty young girl in this lovely red coat.

I bought a blouse...a nice one, with embroidery on both sides...and a beige hat.

And gloves. I looked quite nice, I must admit. I didn't show I'm poor at that time.<sup>6</sup>

(Chamberlain 2005: 98, 108)

There was clearly a stylistics of migration; a considered and concerted aim to look as good as possible for the moment of arrival, that goes to the heart of migrant identity. Moreover, this was not simply a question of what you wore, but how you wore it. It was about the angle of a hat, the cut of a skirt and the colour of a coat; the panache with which you presented who you were when you stepped off the boat or train and into a new life. As one group of Caribbean women in Birmingham told cultural historian, Tina Campt: 'We taught the English how to dress!...Those teddy boys used to beat up our boys because they looked so sharp. It was not just about race. It was about style!' (Campt 2012: 163; see also Campt 2008).

But it was about race and style and colour. What is interesting is how signs of sartorial respectability and status were turned, in the hands of journalists and academics, into signs of alien strangeness and unpredictable sexuality. How the 'lovely red coat' became a taffeta petticoat and the terrible secret of Sapphire's black identity. The first step in this process was to interpret the crisp dresses, pretty cardigans, and sharp suits as visual signs of cultural outsidersness; clothes made for a tropical climate and unsuited (like their wearers) to the British climate/atmosphere. In her investigation of 'colour shock' and 'strangeness', sociologist Sheila Patterson recalled a bleak February day in 1956 and the arrival of a typical group of black migrants in Folkestone:

Almost all wore sandals or light shoes, straw hats, and pastel-coloured summer clothes, now stained and crumpled after three days of train and sea travel from Genoa. Several had wound towels round their necks or heads, or had put on two or more jackets, in a vain effort to keep out the dank chill. (Patterson 1963: 4)<sup>7</sup>

Gone are the sartorial signs of aspiration, respectability and style and what is left, or what is seen, are grubby, lightweight clothes and shivering immigrants. The clothes, like the imagined colonies, are always bright and tropical; for these observers, there are never any cold nights or formal occasions in the West Indies. Clothes were the source of great unease in the colonial encounter in Britain; they signified the alien nature of these new citizens and, at its most extreme, this discomfort expressed itself in the terms of mythic racism. A group of West Indian dockers in Liverpool told race relations writer Anthony Richmond that they were frequently asked: ‘...if they used to wear clothes at home, and did the girls in Jamaica wear grass skirts.’ (Richmond 1954: 59)

What emerges clearly from the extensive discourse on migration and clothing in the 1950s is how multivalent and deeply significant dress was: it created general impressions and reinforced or challenged preconceptions; it made you feel good; it was a personal statement; it was misinterpreted and could be recruited for a myriad of ideological purposes. Beryl Gilroy came from Guyana to England in 1951 in order to pursue her teaching career; she became the first black head teacher in London and an influential education activist and author. One of her suits from this period is now in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. It is a deep pink, tailored piece, made in Guyana and styled from American fashion magazines.<sup>8</sup> Gilroy later recalled:

Everyone was wearing grey and black and we brought bright colours. We were used to wearing bright colours. We would walk along dressed to the nines and bouncing with confidence – people had never seen the likes of us; they’d never seen black people smart...We really enjoyed our clothes...we couldn’t win you know. If you were dressed up people would think ‘you are wearing our clothes’, but if you were in bright colours from [our] country,

it would be 'look at those foreigners'. (Gilroy 1994; see also Gilroy 1976 and Tulloch 2016)

Gilroy's recollections illustrate how clothes were used and enjoyed in this period and also the awareness that what you wore was constantly interpreted by others. We can no more assume that all white Britons wore drab, neutral colours than we can accept that colonial migrants were always dressed in bright colours; what is indisputable is that these images and beliefs dominated popular and academic representations of racial difference and that the visual language of dress was a post-war battleground for respectability and social status.

Clothes expanded and gave a highly visible expression to the connotations of colour and race. Male and female colonial migrants were equally defined through their dress and style, with the cut of men's suits the subject of particular fascination. West Indian men's suits were 'sharp'; they were bigger and bolder than usually worn in Britain, with wider trouser legs, higher waists, bigger lapels and brighter fabrics. No sooner had the *Empire Windrush* docked in England, than the trade journal *Tailor and Cutter*, was reporting on the well-dressed "'Zootable" Imports!!' (1948a: 513; figure 10), picking out the details of trouser shape and shoulder padding that characterised the American, drape style zoot suits that the men were wearing. Two months later the paper published a longer piece on the psychology of the zoot suit and what it supposedly said about the origins of the men who wore it:

It is a reflection of the Negro's connections with the tropics – where his instincts were attuned to extremes of growth and colour and heat and excitement and are now reflected in his adoption of these sartorial exaggerations.

Within the discourses of post-war colonial migration, the taste for bright colours and big styling was defined as a racial predisposition, an aspect of essentialist racial characteristics.

The author of the article saw something more threatening, however, in the remodelling of tailoring norms than merely the expression of bad taste; it was a *statement*:

...the symbol of a once captive, now emancipated, race thumbing its nose at the world and the world's conventions...an instinctive reaction embodied in a pathetic attempt to outwhiteman the white man...<sup>9</sup> (*Tailor and Cutter* 1948b: 706-7. See also Banton 1955: 202-3; Wickenden 1958: 25 and Chibnall 1985).

Clothes not only determine how people look, they also alter the appearance of city streets and urban landscapes. The cut and colour of migrant clothes were changing the appearance of Britain and reworking its conventions of self-fashioning. For the fashion historian James Laver, who was Keeper of Prints, Drawings and Paintings at the V&A throughout the 1950s, it was possible for migrants to be fully assimilated but the black man was: '...unable to suppress completely his own individuality.' This view was expressed in his article 'A Touch of Colour', one of a series on 'Clothes and the Welfare State', published in *Punch* in 1953. There is an appropriate ambiguity to the title of the article; does he refer to clothes or skin, or are they now so imbricated as to be semantically inseparable? Drawing on a succession of stereotypes, Laver describes the tailoring of black men as a form of hyper-masculinity, their clothes are more interesting than their female counterparts because: '...they have, so to speak, *been through* European clothes, and come out on the other side, into a world of freedom and fantasy.' (Original emphasis; Laver 1953: 487) The reader can only wonder whose fantasy it is. A full-page caricature accompanies Laver's article; a sketchy evocation of a contemporary British street corner, with the defining silhouettes of the migrant bodies that were re-forming the nation (figure 11).

## Conclusion

‘Red taffeta under a tweed skirt...the black under the white’. Disentangling this short bite of film dialogue opens up a world of discourse and representation in which colour and clothes define racial and sexual identity. As a black woman, Sapphire is sexualised by the choice of the colour red as much as by the style of lingerie. By the 1950s the basic rules of the psychology of colours were available to everyone, and chromatic choice could be informed and mindful. In its February 1952 issue, *Everywoman* offered a colour table and a double-page spread on the psychology of colours:

RED: ‘psychology’ : ...the symbol of power, war and sex.

‘why you wear it’: To attract men physically...to excite the opposite sex.

‘men’s reactions’: Immediate and physical. To young men, red is the colour of sex and is meant to be.

It would take a bold woman to read this and go out and buy a red dress or petticoat; better, by far, to choose a neutral colour:

NEUTRALS: ‘psychology’: These are the complex colours of civilization...

Denote normal adjustment to modern living...

‘men’s reactions’: They like them on their married womenfolk and families.<sup>10</sup>

(Winnicroft 1952: 52-3)

Red is physical, sexual and basic; unlike the neutral colours, it represents a less advanced form of civilization and, by implication, an abnormal adjustment to modern life.

Wives wore neutrals; they wore tweeds – a mix of practical stylishness and provincial restraint. Overcoats and hats were key items and generated multiple adaptations, with manufacturers and press advertising overcoats, topcoats, weather wear, and storm collars.

Fabrics were preferably natural, colours were muted, and contrasts unobtrusive. The favoured colours were browns and neutrals; in 1948 the *Tailor and Cutter* described the colours being used for women's suits that year:

There is much use being made of donkey brown (which is another name for snuff colour). Beige brown and beige fawn are amongst the most favoured tones and they are used plus rust and a pleasing light royal for heavy linen.

(1948a: 375)

Later in the year its correspondent reported a new tone called 'greige' (1948c: 544), which was joined, in the spring of 1950 by: 'Fog Blue which is particularly flattering to the older woman.' (1950: 165) Of course, if you preferred something a little darker, it was still possible to order a coat in 'Nigger' (*Everywoman* 1951: 20).

Post-war colour was, of course, never neutral. It was overladen with meanings and created the conditions through which people made sense of themselves and of each other. Red taffeta and brown tweed – a choice of colours, fabrics and races. Perhaps the greatest contrast in *Sapphire*, is not between the two lives of the eponymous victim, or even between Sapphire and David's frustrated, grey sister, Mildred, but between the elegant white mother on Hampstead Heath and the black woman in her red taffeta petticoat.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the social and moral language of clothes in the nineteenth century see Lynda Nead, 'Women in Red: Dress, Morality and Visual Culture in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', Museum of London for Gresham College, 4 March 2014  
<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/women-in-red>

<sup>2</sup> The underwear shops of Shaftesbury Avenue were part of the shopping landscape of the West End in the 1950s. See Toni del Renzio, *after a fashion...* (London: ICA Publications, 1956) p. 1: '...psychological accounts of clothing elaborate the attractions for men of the windows of Shaftesbury Avenue underwear shops.' See also the shots of Shaftesbury Avenue in the British Pathé film, 'This Was Yesterday', 1955.  
<http://www.Britishpathe.com/video/this-was-yesterday-title>, accessed 29.12.2014.

<sup>3</sup> E. G. Cousins, *Sapphire* (London: Panther, 1959) p. 11. The film was based on an original story and screenplay by Janet Green.

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<sup>4</sup> British Nationality Act, 1948. 11 & 12 Geo. 6 c. 56.

<sup>5</sup> On colonial communities in Britain before the war see D. W. Dean, 'Coping With Colonial Immigration, the Cold War and Colonial Policy: The Labour Government and Black Communities in Great Britain 1945-51', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 6:3 (November 1987) esp. pp. 305-10.

<sup>6</sup> All quotes are taken from the National Life Story Collection, as cited in Chamberlain 2005. See also Tulloch 2010b: 508-10.

<sup>7</sup> See also Glass 1960: 9. In Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners*, 1<sup>st</sup> publ. 1956 (London: Penguin, 2006) Sir Galahad arrives in a lightweight suit but insists that he does not feel the cold to demonstrate his 'acclimatisation' in the city, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Nat Gaynes, skirt suit, cotton, early-1950s, Guyana. Given by Dr Beryl Gilroy, Victoria & Albert Museum, museum no. T.134, 135-1995.  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O138168/skirt-suit-gaynes-nat>.

<sup>9</sup> "'Zootable" Imports!!', *Tailor and Cutter*, 2 July 1948, p. 513. 'The Psychology of the Zoot Suit', 10 September 1948, pp. 706-7. On male immigrant clothes see Michael Banton, *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in an English City* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955) pp. 202-3 and James Wickenden, *Colour in Britain* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1958) p. 25. On the zoot suit see Steve Chibnall, 'Whistle and Zoot: The Changing Meaning of a Suit of Clothes', *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, 20 (Autumn 1985): 56-81.

<sup>10</sup> See also *Everywoman* October 1954, p. 44: 'The women who wear striking reds crave attention. They are exhibitionists and want the spotlight.' For advice on cultivating a sense of colour see 'The Art of Being a Beautiful Woman', March 1955, 10-page section, and the cover of January 1956: 'Join Our Colour Crusade for Your Looks, Your Home, Your Party Tables.'

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Figure 11.

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