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Slave Nation

Devil's Advocate had made Howe's name. In its wake, the *Independent* dubbed him a 'black media star' (1 March 1998), and the *Mirror's* 'Black Whose Who' described him as an 'influential TV presenter and journalist' (16 February 1999). Nevertheless, the *Devil's Advocate* formula, like the *Bandung* format before it, imposed limits on what Howe could achieve. The documentaries of the naughties, made with Diverse TV, allowed Howe to be more ambitious in scope. *White Tribe* and *Slave Nation* reflected contemporary public debates over the meaning of Englishness, with Howe playing the role of a modern-day anthropologist creating an ethnography of England's white population. Latterly, the focus of his programmes shifted. Reflecting long-standing trends, Howe himself became the centre of attention, the style more confessional. In addition to his major documentaries, Howe's celebrity and reputation for controversy meant that he was a regular on television and radio for the whole decade.

White Tribe

White Tribe was Howe's first major documentary. It picked up from where his 1998 *England my England* had left off. Both shows took Howe on the road, focusing on chance meetings. The 1998 *England my England* was Howe's first big television piece after the conclusion of *Devil's Advocate*. Howe was paired with Peregrine Worsthorne. Writing in *The Spectator*, Worsthorne expressed his surprise that Channel 4 'should have chosen a crusty old reactionary like me to take part'. He 'learnt later that the choice was not theirs but that of my West Indian co-"star", Darcus Howe, who, believe it or not, had made my presence a condition of agreeing to undertake the job' (11 April 1998). The two had crossed swords on an episode of *Devil's Advocate* dealing with the Royal Family. Worsthorne had appeared following Dhondy's suggestion that Howe examine

a right-wing patrician. Howe had suggested Worsthorne, who he viewed as a worthy opponent as well as a good writer.

Howe used the show to make the case that the attitudes of white people in Britain had changed since the 1960s, that British racism, in the population at large, was if not dead then certainly dying. Worsthorne was more pessimistic, claiming that the weight of history meant that it would take several generations before British racism was dead. The analysis that Howe presented during the documentary reflected a more general perception, rooted in his own intuitions and experience. In essence, he was

aiming to demonstrate in my grand tour of the state of English hearts and minds of all hues and classes that my childhood intuition that England was my home, that England was MY England was an intuition that, despite many setbacks, was a sound one. But that it had to be sought for and fought with a great deal of cunning and a sense of what in the English tradition of politics, religion and culture could be drawn on, to achieve this lifetime's ambition.

(UC DHP Box IX/2)

Whatever their differences, Worsthorne evidently enjoyed working with Howe, his 'new and treasured friend' who, in Worsthorne's view, emerged from the programme, 'very much the hero of the hour' (*The Spectator* 11 April 1998).

Whereas *England my England* had focused on racism, *White Tribe* considered Englishness. Producer Narinder Minhas wanted to make a programme which inverted the focus of traditional programmes about race. Rather than concentrating on black people as a beleaguered minority, it considered a crisis of identity among England's white population. For Howe, the crisis was related to contemporary events (Minhas 2012). The loss of Empire, the prospect of Scottish and Welsh independence – much discussed after the devolution bills of the late 1990s, and the flimsiness of Blair's 'New Britain' all brought the nature of 'Englishness' into question. He also related the question to his own experience, arguing that he had been broadly accepted as British, but never English (*White Tribe*, 27 January 2000).

Minhas was ambitious for the show:

Our real intention was to re-define what multicultural television should be in the new century. There's no reason why multicultural programmes should focus only on people with dark skin and live in the ghettos. Rather, its real future lies in the opportunities it provides for fresh perspectives on subjects that are often the

preserve of “whites”. When did you last see three hours of primetime television on a significant issue fronted by a black man who is not a chef, stand-up comic or a footballer?

(*The Guardian*, 10 January 2000)

Part of Minhas’ aim was to break out of the studio and take Howe ‘on the road’. He envisioned Howe acting like a ‘black Louis Theroux’, conceiving the shows as ‘obstacle courses’ in which the Howe’s unscripted interactions would drive documentary (Minhas 2012). Minhas was keen to work with Howe because of Howe’s political unpredictability. Counter-intuitively during *White Tribe*, the left-wing, urban, radical Howe rejected the hunting ban and was prepared to give the racist comic Bernard Manning an opportunity to defend his material. Some of the interactions were pre-prepared, others serendipitous. His meeting with Norman Tebbit was a chance encounter at a Conservative annual dinner held in the Imperial Palace in Skegness. Howe describes the encounter as a ‘clean cut draw, one all’. Remarkably, Howe did not discuss the ‘cricket test’ with Tebbit.¹ ‘I didn’t want any useless confrontation, because he wasn’t going to change his mind and neither would I’ (Howe 2011h). As for Bernard Manning, Howe comments: ‘I have an instinctive respect for old fools! He was apologetic and extremely polite. I was never biblical or deeply religious about racists. I would take on the police, but I wasn’t an opportunist. I could have confronted Manning, but people would say, “Oh yeah he’s right but he’s a shit that Darcus Howe”’ (Ibid.). Channel 4 threw its weight behind the series, buying billboard space to promote the documentaries.

Howe continued his investigation of Englishness in *The Cricket Test with Darcus Howe*, 3 5-minute pieces that aired in August 2000, and *Slave Nation* which was shown in 2001. *Slave Nation* focused on protest, work and sex. In essence, Howe argued that the English had, by and large, lost their willingness to protest, had adopted a conformist attitude in the workplace and lost the joy of sex. Again, Diverse took Howe on tour, to sex shops in Soho, to a marriage enrichment course in Devon and, to an Egg call centre, to Switzerland with an anarchist Samba band, and, following the publication of the MacPherson Report, to Eltham, the London suburb where Stephen Lawrence had been murdered in 1993. What struck Howe while making *White Tribe* and *Slave Nation* was the poverty he encountered and the attendant ‘stench of decay in homes, and a bitterness. The loss of self assurance.’ Minhas comments: ‘Darcus was visibly shocked by the views of the residents who consider themselves an ethnic minority in a town where they make up 90% of the population’ (*Guardian*, 10 January 2000).

Slave Nation, like *White Tribe* before it, was given a primetime slot. It was not as well received as *White Tribe*. Certainly, the *Independent* welcomed Howe back: 'quibbles aside, it remains a privilege to watch people of diverse backgrounds being scrutinised by a brooding, powerful and teasing presence' (4 August 2001). Similarly, the *Express* considered it 'always good to see Darcus Howe back on our screens, not least as he's one of the few left on television, along with Jonathan Meades, actively allowed to roam free to criticise this fair country' (8 August 2001). *The Times* was less convinced, accusing Howe of a 'rather self-satisfied man who believes that you can camouflage the banality or fatuity of what you are saying by saying it very; very; slowly' (9 August 2001). Perhaps the subtleties of the show were lost on Gary Bushel who opined, '[a]ll Howe's TV shows are pants. . . . For real slave nations try filming in Kenya' (*People*, 26 August 2001). Significantly, none of the reviews acknowledged Howe's work outside of television. As far as the press was concerned, Howe was just another talking head, his activism and his years as editor of *Race Today* were wholly overlooked.

Darcus Howe is not a comedian?

Howe appeared on Mark Lamarr's talk show *Lamarr's Attacks* as part of the publicity for *White Tribe*. It was one of several appearances on comedy shows in the late 1990s and early naughties. In 1996, Howe joined Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer on the comedy quiz show *Shooting Stars*. As part of Mark Lamarr's team, Howe entertained the crowd with an impersonation of Trevor McDonald and, through the medium of dance, with a representation of a salmon ascending a waterfall (1 November 1996). Reeves and Mortimer evidently enjoyed Howe's appearance (Thompson 2010), as did Howe, who later described the show as 'just songs, songs of freedom and bilious stupidity' (*Shooting Stars – the inside Story*, 30 December 2008). *The Real McCoy's* parodied *Devil's Advocate*. Leo Chester, now Leo Muhammad, appeared as 'Darkman Howe . . . the Devil himself' (5 January 1996). Howe's appearance on *Brass Eye* in 1997 was another matter entirely. Following a mock introduction by Chris Morris, Howe's only contribution to the show was the short, but memorable question, 'What's a "coco-shunter"?' Howe's interview on *Lamarr's Attacks* was part of the show's focus on Britain and Europe. Boris Johnson, Lamarr's first guest, demonstrated his inclusive credentials by declaring himself 'very much in favour of cappuccino

and spaghetti albondiga.' Howe, for his part, spoke up for rice and peas. On a more serious note, he expressed a deep affection for England: 'I have never known a place that did such awful things in slavery and colonialism, and at the end of it say "I don't want to be that anymore."' I think the present spirit of this country is not associated with colonial pomposity and imperial cruelty' (10 September 2000).

The N-bomb

In 2002, Howe made a brief appearance on *Edwardian Country House*, a series which tried to reproduce the dynamics of early-twentieth-century life. The climax of the show's fifth episode was a fancy dress ball for 50 people celebrating the British Empire. Howe, subversively, attended dressed as Toussaint L'Ouverture. His 2004 documentary *Who you callin' a nigger?* was altogether more controversial. Again, Howe and Minhas wanted to break the mould of multicultural television by investigating racism between different, non-white, ethnic groups. The notion of 'black-on-black' violence had surfaced in the mainstream media in 1998, following shootings in Lambeth and Brent. Howe was alerted to growing inter-ethnic conflict by his son Amiri. The title also recalled the 2002 controversy over J. Lo's, apparently affectionate, reference to her husband P. Diddy as 'my nigga'.

Starting in the West Midlands, investigating conflict between black and Asian youth, Howe discussed militant Islam and anti-Semitism, as well as violence between first-generation immigrants from Africa and second- and third-generation immigrants from the West Indies. Through a series of interviews, Howe established that inter-ethnic tension was a genuine concern for modern Britain. This conclusion troubled many. On the eve of the broadcast, Howe appeared on Channel 4 News with the musician Nitin Sawhney and Shahid Malik, a member of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee, to debate his findings. For Sawhney, the film presented 'inappropriate and irresponsible images' which ignored 'so many positive, positive examples' of inter-ethnic harmony. Malik went further, commenting, 'I think Darcus' piece is potentially quite dangerous because I think it exaggerates what is quite a small problem . . .' (8 August 2004). Malik was as critical of Howe's motives as he was of his journalism. 'It's sad', he commented, 'that Darcus feels he has to do something controversial to get media attention. He's the king of exaggeration . . .' (Ibid.).

In a sense, the debate reflected the old tension in multicultural programming between those who wanted to use television to present solely positive images of multicultural Britain and those who chose to face reality. The press was far more positive. The *Times* nominated *Who you callin' a nigger?* as the best documentary of the week (9 August 2004). The *Financial Times* described it as 'a vintage piece of Channel 4 . . . thought provoking and sometimes chilling' (13 August 2004), while Charlotte Edward's column in *The Telegraph* argued that the show cemented Howe's reputation as 'one of the country's most respected commentators on race issues' (8 August 2004).

Howe was disappointed by Channel 4's ambivalence to the documentary. Apparently, there were qualms over the title and 'It was scheduled at the darkest hour, 11 p.m. The programme was not once trailed on the channel, which is rare for output that promises an impact.' Even so, he was pleased with the public response, 'it stirred upwards of a million viewers into watching it . . . thousands of words have been written about it and feature articles too. Eighteen pages on C4's website hummed with responses' (*Broadcast*, 25 August 2004).

Howe's status as a television heavyweight was underlined in the same year by his appearance on *Question Time*, the gold standard of television politics shows. Howe joined a predominantly Welsh panel, including Ann Clwyd, broadcasting from Aberystwyth. Howe's presence was easily explained. The British National Party had won a rare victory in a Council Election in Burnley. The panel were united in condemning the racism in general and the British National Party (BNP) in particular. Nonetheless, Howe struck a distinctive note. Last to be called by David Dimbleby, Howe concurred with the panel that the BNP were to be resisted, but added, 'the BNP have to be taken on, head on, but they have to be taken on with those who they attack in the leadership' (19 February 2004). Evidently, while the political consensus on the platform deplored racism, Howe was still alone in emphasizing self-organization and black autonomy. Having dealt with the threat of the BNP, the panel turned its attention to immigration. Broadly, and in keeping with the contradictions of the mainstream consensus, the panel argued that while racism was wrong, immigration should be restricted. After all, one panellist argued, people were fearful that more immigrants would place a strain on public services. Having dealt with the BNP and immigration, the panel moved to the vexed issue of NHS dental provision. Remarkably, here too Howe had much that was distinctive to contribute:

I had to travel from Streatham to Lewisham to get a dentist. And then, two months ago, I came out my door, turned left, four houses down the road I saw a huge sign,

“Dentist”. I go there and there’s an Asian old man and he brought three young Asian women from India. I walk up the street a couple of weeks later, another dentist. Do you know who’s there? A Polish man who’s bringing some other Poles to do dental work in south London. So the Labour Party’s not doing anything. In the free flow of migration somebody told the Pole we need some dentists in south London. That is how it happens, and when we are full of dentists, Ann Clwyd will come here and tell us the Labour Party brought them!

(Ibid.)

Shifting focus

Following 2005, there was a discernible change of approach to Howe’s documentaries. Minhas argues that the rise of reality TV had a profound impact on programme making. Since 2000, *Big Brother* had become an established part of British television. By 2005, reality TV shows, including *Love Island* and *Pop Idol*, were legion. Where ordinary folk led, celebrities followed, with celebrity spin-offs of *Big Brother* and *Love Island* as well as *I’m a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*. The success of such shows demonstrated a public taste for confessional television and for seeing celebrities mocked and exposed warts and all. Television’s changing ethos was not lost on Minhas. Indeed, Minhas concluded that the style of documentaries had to change, that there was no longer an audience for programmes that explored big ideas and grand narratives in the way that *Bandung*, *White Tribe* and *Slave Nation* had done (Minhas 2011). Documentaries would need to adapt their format, content and style to the challenge of reality TV. Where the women’s movement declared the personal as political, commissioning editors like Minhas were now keen to explore ‘issues’ primarily through the lens of the personal.

Consequently, *Son of Mine* took a new direction. Howe was no longer the impersonal scripted voice making objective pronouncements. Rather, he was simply another subjective voice, in front of a camera with access to all areas of his life. In addition to the stylistic changes, there was also a change of focus. *Son of Mine* was primarily an investigation of Howe’s personal life. There had been personal asides in the previous documentaries. Howe’s ex-wife appeared in the final section of *Slave Nation*, and his son’s wedding prefaced *Who you callin’ a nigger?*, but in *Son of Mine*, what had been at the margin moved to the centre.

Howe was happy with the subject matter of the programme. He was far less happy with finished programme. Howe argues that the show’s Director James

Quinn had already decided on the arc of the documentary before filming began. The documentary focused on Howe's relationship with his son Amiri Howe. The story it tells has a clear structure in which the relationship goes through a series of conflicts ultimately leading to a climactic resolution. In Howe's view, 'the worst documentaries are made to a plot and a plan, and then the director creates falsely a moment of profundity' (Howe 2011h). This, for Howe, was the main problem with *Son of Mine*.

If anything, *Son of Mine* was eclipsed by the publicity surrounding it. As part of the promotion, Howe appeared on Radio 4's *Midweek* alongside the comedian Joan Rivers. The flash point occurred over River's studious avoidance of the word 'black'.

Howe: The use of the term black offends you.

Rivers: The use of the term black offends me? Where the hell are you coming from?

You have got such a chip on your shoulder. How dare you say that to me?

Howe: I think this is a language problem.

Rivers: No I don't. I think this is a problem in your stupid head. You had a child, you left them, your wife said you weren't there. You married a woman, you deserted her, now your son comes back he's got problems. Where were you when he was growing up, until he was eight years old?

Howe: May we continue?

Rivers: How dare you. Please continue, but don't you dare call me that. Son of a bitch.

(*Midweek*, 19 October 2005)

Speaking to *The Times*, Rivers explained 'I just went NUTS! . . . I stopped the whole show, and just SCREAMED at him' (20 October 2005). The quarrel was picked up by the press, the *Independent* offered Howe a piece of free advice, 'You don't mess with Joan Rivers' (20 October 2005). Howe claims that the spat was over as soon as it began, all publicity is good publicity and they both had shows to promote (Howe 2011h).

Son of Mine was something of a game changer for Howe. Significantly, little of the coverage of the row with Rivers or the documentary mentioned Howe's back story. For some in the media, Howe was a man without roots, nothing more than a television personality. Implicit in much of the coverage was the assumption that Howe spoke for the sake of speaking, but lacked weight as a serious commentator. Howe's role as organizer of the Black People's Day of Action, his involvement in the Mangrove Trial, his association with Walter Rodney, or with John La Rose or with C. L. R. James went unremarked. Paul Vallely,

writing for the *Independent*, summed up the impression of Howe created in the film thus:

There was Darcus Howe's life's work on a neat little plate: a doughty portion of advocacy, with a dollop of Marxist historical inevitability, a cupful of excuses, a liberal sprinkling of rights with a deliberate underseasoning of responsibilities, and all stirred together in a recipe unchanged since his heyday in the Sixties.

(22 October 2005)

Certainly, the article went on to flesh out some of his achievements, but the main point of this history was that Howe belonged to a different age, his perspective was no longer relevant. For all of the hype, the documentary was not aired on Channel 4, but on the newly created digital Channel More4. Whatever else the piece achieved, Diverse's documentary had lost the primetime.

New Statesman

From the mid-1990s, Howe was a regular columnist for the *New Statesman*. His work for the magazine earned him the Columnist of the Year at the 1998 Race in the Media awards. Howe's essays, perhaps more than the later documentaries, give an indication of his continuing political preoccupations. During his 17-year stint as a regular columnist, he touched on many themes that he had once explored in the pages of *Race Today*. On a couple of occasions, using recognizably Jamesian language, he used the column to advocate a Caribbean federation. He wrote about cricket; recounted episodes from the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s continuing his work as chronicler of the grass-roots struggle; as well as keeping a keen eye on the police. In lighter moments, he offered the readership his recipe for the perfect Christmas, salt cod followed by goose 'seasoned with herbs sown and reaped in the foothills of the Northern Range in Trinidad' (7 January 2002), and recounted some of the absurdities of his run-ins with the police. Characteristically, Howe used the magazine to campaign. One of his most immediately successful campaigns was a series of articles which played a part in the dismissal of James McGrath, Boris Johnson's political strategist (26 June 2008).

During the naughties, Howe's celebrity status proved double-edged. It allowed him to make a series of important documentaries, which undoubtedly broke the mould of multicultural programming. It also ensured him an audience in the

New Statesman, from which he was able to continue to popularize James' ideas, hold officialdom to account and to continue to campaign. However, at the same time, his fame overshadowed his early activities as a campaigner and organizer. As a result, when Howe encountered controversy, he was increasingly viewed, in the press at least, as a talking head, a man who was famous for being famous, or as Paul Vallely put it 'Britain's leading professional black man' (*Independent*, 22 October 2005). *Son of Mine* proved to be a turning point. While some praised Howe's bravery, others condemned him for using his family to regain the media spotlight. Nonetheless, the short termism of the media is itself double-edged, holding, as it does, the possibility of rediscovery.

Note

- 1 See: Fraser (2005: 306).