

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House: Double Take, Documentary and Outing Whiteness

(R. Beckford)

One of Claudia Jones' enduring legacies is the Notting Hill Carnival. Now I am sure she would have a few things to say about its current incarnation - especially the role of big business in shaping and moulding the event. But it is important to remember that carnival in Caribbean cultures has always been more than just a commercial vehicle.

'Classic carnival' particularly those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a highly coded spectacle weaving together visual cunning, religious metaphor, social criticism and political agency. To speak of the "carnavalesque" today is still an invitation to look beyond the surface - the dancing, costume and music and identify the deeper levels of meaning at work.

So in the spirit of the Carnival, I want to offer a talk that focuses on hidden meanings and their profound political potential.

The title of this lecture comes from the work of radical black, feminist Audre Lorde. It implies that serious counter-politics are required for addressing the master's house or what black feminist bell hooks coins as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." I love the fact that

African Americans intellectual culture is willing to out white power and not dance around the edges.

Lorde's counter politics demands new thoughts and actions - an epistemic repudiation of masculinist ways of knowing and political practice. She continues, that without a paradigm shift only a narrow allowable change will occur.

What is intriguing is that Lorde's new tools emerge through a dialogue on difference: in her life and struggle as a black, lesbian feminist, she navigates between various feminist camps to provide a non-dominant politics and enable all women to move from patriarchy's "divide and conquer" to a feminist mantra of - "define and empower." I like the idea that by moving in-between we can forge new and potent tools - weaponry to dismantle oppressive structures. I will return to this idea later as it is something I have applied to the complex in-between of being a working class African Caribbean man in a white middle class professional world.

I am on Lorde's side - as an African Caribbean man in Britain I am also keen to dismantle the "master's house" - fight against race, class, gender and sexual orientation discrimination. Now I may not be a radical lesbian feminist but as African American cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal has noted, progressive black men must develop what he terms "new black male" politics that are inclusive, egalitarian and non--dominant.

In most recent years, I have focused on documentary film as a vehicle to "define and empower." Since 1999 I been involved in the making of fifteen films, thirteen of which I have presented. The project began in part as a challenge. Nearly ten years ago I appeared on Channel 4's Right to Reply to criticize the lack of meaning factual television aimed at people of African descent. In an off the cuff remark, the then commissioning editor for youth programmes and the person responsible for commissioning "Bad Ass Television," the programme I was criticising, dared me to try and do better. [clip]

So reflecting on this project, the question that I want to explore this evening is to what extent it is possible to make use of the commercial television documentary to dismantle the master's house?

After all, visual media in this post-literate age is a strategic location in the struggle over what it means to exist and excel in this country. The struggle against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is therefore on one level a battle over representation.

Now, going back to Audrey Lorde and thinking about the in-between as a way of developing new tools, it is important to state from the outset that, I approach this question from a particular location.

1. Double Take

In contemporary Britain, like many politically oriented black professionals, I inhabit a social and political space (using the brilliant social analysis of Malcolm X), somewhere between the "Master's house" and the "slave quarters." I'm referring to tension of not quite belonging. According to Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes, inside the master's house its the story of "living with racism. " -- You join a prestigious corporation or elite institution only to find yourself confined to the margins. In my day job in higher education 'living with racism' is further exacerbated by limited institutional support and community disinterest in intellectual matters. As the great dean of African American pragmatism, Cornel West states, "to work in the academy is self imposed exile." But living in-between also means that you can be equally alienated from those in the "slave quarters" - the black masses. I like the way that the fictional black-exploitation detective John Shaft frames the dilemma of black professionals in white institutions: ". . . . it is to be too black for the workplace but too white for the community."

However, I don't think it is an impossible or completely no-win situation. I have always tried to chart these waters by being open to new possibilities posed by both polarities and in the words of my mentor, "live in the master's house but retain the mentality of the slave quarters." My mentor is a radical Afri-centric Hebrew

scholar and his words refer to the development of an insurgent model of black intellectual life acting as both critic and catalyst for change. So, rather than being a place of trauma or isolation, I interpret my in-between as one of struggle yes, but also creative: fecund with new perspectives and ideas for dismantling.

Now a major theme that crops up from living the intersection is identity. Living in-between produces what LSC's Paul Gilroy terms a dialectic of identity, or a double-consciousness. Now, I don't think of double-consciousness in the cultural politics sense identified by DuBois - a tension between Africa in the New World, but instead in a carnivalesque sense - a double take on life, seeing and hearing on more than one level.

Double consciousness or working at various levels of meaning at the same time is profoundly important especially in the age in which we live. As black feminist Patricia Hill Collins makes clear in her study of black women in the work place, increased monitoring and surveillance and the threat of sanction makes it difficult to be vocal about oppressive systems and practices in spaces and places that extensively monitor and control black bodies. And if the truth be told, post 9/11 and 7/7 we have witnessed increased surveillance of black people both at work and on the streets. My experience in documentary film is that it is equally problematic to speak about particular issues and get space on prime-time TV. So to be able to speak and do

in code becomes the only way that you can say what you need to say and stay to those who want to hear.

The specific types of double-consciousnesses that emerges from my experience in Britain are not new and have a long and distinguished history in diaspora cultures. They are the double take and double voice.

Double take is all about the dynamics of imitation. When you work in the master's house, you learn to play the part but also play with the part. Mimesis or imitation with a difference and is grounded in ambivalence - not completely fitting in. But ambivalence is a also camouflage which according to post colonial theory equips oppressed people to, if they desire, to challenge the status quo. You see imitation with a difference can also be the source of mimicry - "not quite being like you" can also mean "I think you are messed up." In other words mimicry can be mockery and lend itself to resistance.

I became aware of the potential of mimicry when as a child. At home, I would occasionally imitate members of the church congregation for our family's amusement. Making use of slight exaggerations and slippage in behaviour or tone of voice I would bring to life particular features of the pastor or prominent members of the church. If my mother caught me doing it, she would not only chastise me but also insist I stop "acting the mimic." Now my Jamaican mother, born and raised in a Caribbean colony had never read Homi

Bhabha, but she knew that the triangulation mimicry, mockery and resistance are potent.

Double take provides me with a constant sense that that how I present myself as a black professional is a canvas with layers of meaning. And in documentary the mimetic provides me a tool to play with and encode new meaning.

The second creative process is the "double voice." The double voice is signifying practice, saying one thing but meaning another. You only need to listen to reggae dancehall to see the dynamic legacy of the double-voice in metaphor. In Caribbean literature the double voice is synonymous with the mythical Anancy the spider. Anancy in the Caribbean manifestation is a liminal trickster figure using cunning and deception to ensure that things work in his favour. He speaks in the double voice - saying one thing but meaning another.

The double voice is more than verbal trickery; it is also a creative process of adjoining and constructing meaning(s), to provide new connections and possibilities. In other words, the verbal web that Anancy weaves is creates a new world. The web is therefore always a place of meeting and forging of new things. As I mentioned before, new black male politics have to make connections with others for the sake of securing justice for all.

These two 'code switching' devices are essential components in my attempts to develop a counter politics between the house and the slave quarters - tools for criticism and also mobilizing others to think and act in new ways. But can they dismantle the master's house?

Well there are limitations as any communication within a sign system does not always fit. For instance, on one occasion a film I made that was encoded with questions of redemption, "Empire Pays Back" was interpreted by an African Caribbean youth as an Channel 4 trying to take away the black audience from East Enders as both programs went out on a Monday night! You can signify all you want but who and how its read, can't be controlled.

I want to answer the question in two parts - first, by briefly exploring the dynamics of documentary and second, citing examples of trying to dismantle the foundations of the master's house - outing whiteness.

2. Documentary

Now there may appear to be a clash of ideals here - double-consciousness, code, versus documentary - straight hard fact right? Well, I think that documentary provides a natural home for the double take because documentary is after all a construction of reality with referential integrity. Let me explain.

My approach to the documentary is influenced by the idea that there is always a tension lying at the heart of the genre; representing the "real" through the limitations of the screen "reel."

To be honest, I was never someone who believed that the form was ever an accurate reflection or representation of actuality or facts. I can remember as a teenager watching domestic "race" issues on political matters in Africa played out in mainstream documentary series like the BBC's Panorama or ITV's World in Action. Invariably, the next day at secondary school, my friends and I would debate the merits of the programme and spar with one another, boxing clever with conspiracy theories. Even as immigrant children in post-colonial Britain we sensed that the master's tools could not dismantle the master's house - mainstream documentary rarely did justice to the complexity of our situation. But there are still many people who when they think of a documentary, perceive it as "real", that is the recording of actuality - raw footage of real events as they happen.

But in reality, the filmmaker not only makes choices about what is shot, but also the footage is cut, edited, ordered and presented. Likewise the present asks particular questions, makes specific comments about what is seen and done - all of which influence how an event is recorded and interpreted.

So documentary is best understood as a "representational mode of film making" and representation always signifies, speaks on more than one level. Given this understanding, what I have tried to do with my films is to "play within" what is being recorded to represent "the real" as multilayered. So that all films document events at a number of levels. It is Nancy trickery to get direction through indirection.

But why is it necessary to speak on different levels - code? Why not just explore what needs to be explored? Because there are so few opportunities to do so on mainstream TV. Apart from from the victories we have had on Channel 4, the norm is that if you want to explore black issues in a complex way you are looking at the black people slot - after midnight. So the the only way to explore and examine meaningful politics is mostly in code.

I was not surprised to discover as an outsider that documentaries that pathologise black people are the easiest films to get commissioned. You go to a commissioning editor with a so called "dangerous investigation" of an aspect of black life and it's got a good chance of being made. You don't have to take my word for it. Just take a glance, for instance, at the films made about Jamaicans over the past ten years. I know that Jamaicans feel there is a vendetta against them because the Jamaican groups awarded me for refusing to papering to the usual colonial

and racist images of Jamaicans the film I made in 2002 on Jamaican Independence.

Also, look at this week's schedule. It's kind of intriguing that in a year when we are supposed to be reflecting on the abolition of the slave trade, we end up with series like Millionaires Mission and Meet the Natives. I think these series reveal how colonial some millionaires still are and also fail to get at the heart of the problem of development.

I have been very fortunate to have been able to work at Channel 4 with a commission editor who is willing to buck the trend, Aaqil Ahmed. Films such as Empire Pays Back, Ghetto Britain and The Great African Scandal, may not have been made without an editor who understood the social democratic values of meaningful diversity in visual culture.

Conversely, The hardest area to expose, in my experience is the workings of whiteness.

3. Whiteness

As I said earlier, the most important bit of dismantling you can do is to "out" whiteness. But What does it meant to talk about the outing of whiteness? Well whiteness is how we imaging the category of "white" to work in the world. Historically, whiteness emerged as part of the "West's" global expansion and imperial project. It is

however, historically contingent and therefore subject to change over time - you can be white at one moment and then "raced" like the rest of us in the next. What I want to get at here is the idea that whiteness stands for privilege in general but, its not an essential category so we can't talk about it as being stable or coherent and without contradiction. Accessing the power of whiteness also gifts one with power, especially the power to position others at the borders.

Because whiteness is fluid, its boundaries have to be policed. You have to be able to say who and who will not get access to the club. But the prospect of surveillance and monitoring of boundaries is not a new - being black is to live with within a panopticon, knowing our behaviour is being monitored to ensure we maintain the order.

In his book on whiteness in the media, sociologist John Gabriel, crystallizes the workings of whiteness into three discursive themes.

The first is ex-nomination or being un-raced. That is to say, that whiteness is rarely given an ethnic quality or named. It's just white. For example, If like me you went to an inner city comprehensive and had to attend multi-cultural evenings then you may remember how the white English stand was always missing.

Being unnamed provides it with two accompanying powers: it is able to function as an invisible norm and a universal to which other subjectivities are measured. For instance, I was on my way home from Newcastle last week and sat next to a woman who developed psycho-metric testing in business. We discussed the cultural and social presuppositions behind her tests and by the time we had arrived in Derby, she said, "you are right, these test do centralize a white male personality type - but that is why we give black and Asian workers an easier test." She almost got the point!

But just because you have the privilege of whiteness does not mean you cant, as Les Back says, "step out of it."

When I was an undergraduate in New York, I shared a room with an American Jew, Rich Rose. He was a big "Smiths" fan, (yeh, spent lots of time feeling depressed . . .) On several occasions Rich told me the chilling story of his grandfather, a bomber pilot, who fought against the Nazis in Germany. One night, in the middle of '44 his grandfather awoke in a cold sweat; he dreamed that Hitler had won the war and that he was on the run, running for his life. The next day, troubled by the nightmare, he shortened his very Jewish sounding name to a more anglicized "Rose" so that, if is nightmare became a reality; he would have temporary cover. The story made a great impression on the Rose family and Rich would constantly remind me that his brand of whiteness - upper middle class Jewish life in cosmopolitan New York, was a

certain kind of white - often "raced" and never quite universal or secure within whiteness.

So if whiteness is unmarked, always in the drag of naturalisation and universalism. How is it able to maintain the status quo - how does it ensure its survival and prowess - or what cultural critic Ruth Frye terms the ways of "Whiteliness."

A central trick is that it is expressed through other discourses: it is possible to maintain boundaries and relationships by encoding privilege and supremacy. Nowhere is this more evident on the racialised discourse on crime. In recent years in Britain we have seen the emergence of the term "Black on Black" crime - although this political construct has been around in the US for a lot longer. Partly in response to gang related violence and gun crime the Metropolitan Police established operation Trident to tackle this specific problem. But why "race" this particular crime and not others? Surely the domination of pedophile activity and grand fraud by white middle class men demands similar specificity and racing? The focus on blackness and criminality maintains a connection between the black body and the criminal body and ideological trickster move that ensures the displacing and denying the structural forces at work in crime.

4. Outing Whiteness in Documentary

As I mentioned before there are permitted moments of protest where you can be specific and out white privilege - but its rare. For instance in "Ghetto Britain" I argued for a quarter of the film to explore the "white middle class ghetto" alongside black and brown communities in Birmingham and Bradford. [clip]

But these outings are rare. Normally its a case of encoding the ways that whiteness as privilege gets woven into discussions on history, economics and politics. For example, in "Empire Pays Back" I wanted to explore how racial terror of slavery had been sanitized in recent British history and made to be a "black problem." So we went on a well know London radio show to make the point. We actually re-wrote the beginning of the film to get to grips with denial. [Clip]

The second comes from The Great African scandal. In the scene, we have just exposed the environmental catastrophe created by the gold mining techniques of British registered company, Anglo-Gold Ashanti. I wanted to find a way of connecting the discourse on global trade explored in the film with a longer history of exploitation of black bodies as well as engaging with the contemporary discussions on the use of the N Word. My approach was to link economic exploitation in the present with the dehumanization of Africans in the past - to connect the slave trade with the new experience of being trade slaves [clip]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Black history is littered with examples of subversive action, action that was never exclusive to known radicals or revolutionaries. There is a long and distinguished political praxis that in our history that takes place by slowly dismantling oppressive forces through the subliminal - a deeper level of engagement.

I have attempted in a small way to try and out whiteness - to demonstrate that it can be done in the commercial documentary in a small way - a flea bite on the beast of "whiteness" - but as every flea knows, you can take a bite but there is a good chance you will get squashed or crushed.

As I said at the start, I was not sure if Claudia Jones would be happy with the state of the Notting Hill Carnival. But I am sure that she would be keen on the spirit of 'classic carnival' that lives on with those of us seeking out new ways to ensure a change of power relations, putting the mask, in order to unmask oppression.
