

The matter of whiteness

Racial¹ imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidised and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. The myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at every point informed by judgements about people's capacities and worth, judgements based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgements. Race is not the only factor governing these things and people of goodwill everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play. And since race in itself – insofar as it is anything in itself – refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.

There has been an enormous amount of analysis of racial imagery in the past decades, ranging from studies of images of, say, blacks or American Indians in the media to the deconstruction of the fetish of the racial Other in the texts of colonialism and post-colonialism. Yet until recently a notable absence from such work has been the study of images of white people. Indeed, to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people. Yet race is not only attributable to people who are not white, nor is imagery of non-white people the only racial imagery.

This book is about the racial imagery of white people – not the images of other races in white cultural production, but the latter's imagery of white people themselves. This is not done merely to fill a gap in the analytic literature, but because there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery. As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.

There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race.² But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world.

The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West. We (whites) will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbours, colleagues, customers or clients, and it may be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know. An old-style white comedian will often start a joke: 'There's this bloke walking down the street and he meets this black geezer', never thinking to race the bloke as well as the geezer. Synopses in listings of films on TV, where wordage is tight, none the less squander words with things like: 'Comedy in which a cop and his black sidekick investigate a robbery', 'Skinhead Johnny and his Asian lover Omar set up a laundrette', 'Feature film from a promising Native American director' and so on. Since all white people in the West do this all the time, it would be invidious to quote actual examples, and so I shall confine myself to one from my own writing. In an article on lesbian and gay stereotypes (Dyer 1993b), I discuss the fact that there can be variations on a type such as the queen or dyke. In the illustrations which accompany this point, I compare a 'fashion queen' from the film *Irene* with a 'black queen' from *Car Wash* – the former, white image is not raced, whereas all the variation of the latter is reduced to his race. Moreover, this is the only non-white image referred to in the article, which does not however point out that all the other images discussed are white. In this, as in the other white examples in this paragraph, the fashion queen is, racially speaking, taken as being just human.

This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture. Some of the sharpest criticism of it has been aimed at those who would think themselves the least racist or white supremacist. bell hooks, for instance, has noted how amazed and angry white liberals become when attention is drawn to their whiteness, when they are seen by non-white people as white.

Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of

'sameness', even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think.

(hooks 1992: 167)

Similarly, Hazel Carby discusses the use of black texts in white classrooms, under the sign of multiculturalism, in a way that winds up focusing 'on the complexity of response in the (white) reader/student's construction of self in relation to a (black) perceived "other"'. We should, she argues, recognise that 'everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialised subject' and thus that we should consider whiteness as well as blackness, in order 'to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference' (Carby 1992: 193).

The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity. When I said above that this book wasn't merely seeking to fill a gap in the analysis of racial imagery, I reproduced the idea that there is no discussion of white people. In fact for most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general. Research – into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software – repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard.³ Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race.

We are often told that we are living now in a world of multiple identities, of hybridity, of decentredness and fragmentation. The old illusory unified identities of class, gender, race, sexuality are breaking up; someone may be black *and* gay *and* middle class *and* female; we may be bi-, poly- or non-sexual, of mixed race, indeterminate gender and heaven knows what class. Yet we have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant. The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming – and sometimes sincerely aiming – to speak for humanity. Against the flowering of a myriad postmodern voices, we must also see the countervailing tendency towards a homogenisation of world culture, in the continued dominance of US news dissemination, popular TV programmes and Hollywood movies. Postmodern multiculturalism may have genuinely opened up a space for the voices of the other, challenging the authority of the white West (cf. Owens 1983), but

it may also simultaneously function as a side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them.⁴ We may be on our way to genuine hybridity, multiplicity without (white) hegemony, and it may be where we want to get to – but we aren't there yet, and we won't get there until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule. This is why studying whiteness matters.

It is studying whiteness *qua* whiteness. Attention is sometimes paid to 'white ethnicity' (e.g. Alba 1990), but this always means an identity based on cultural origins such as British, Italian or Polish, or Catholic or Jewish, or Polish-American, Irish-American, Catholic-American and so on. These however are variations on white ethnicity (though, as I suggest below, some are more securely white than others), and the examination of them tends to lead away from a consideration of whiteness itself. John Ibson (1981), in a discussion of research on white US ethnicity, concludes that being, say, Polish, Catholic or Irish may not be as important to white Americans as some might wish. But being white is.

The rest of this chapter provides a series of contexts for looking at whiteness and for the chapters that follow. I begin with a consideration of my own relation to whiteness, my sense of myself as white. It has become common for those marginalised by culture to acknowledge the situation from which they speak,⁵ but those who occupy positions of cultural hegemony blithely carry on as if what they say is neutral and unsituated – human not raced. As I shall argue later, there is something especially white in this non-located and disembodied position of knowledge, and thus it seems especially important to try to break the hold of whiteness by locating and embodying it in a particular experience of being white.

The section after this may be considered as notes on the politics of studying whiteness. I suggest both why it is something that needs to be done – the project of 'making whiteness strange' – and the risks involved. I consider the question of language, especially of what term to use in a study of whiteness to refer to people excluded from and oppressed by the category 'white'. This is followed by a discussion of some methodological issues. The chapter ends with a longer section, presenting a general perspective on whiteness, organised around a concept of embodiment, traced through Christianity, notions of race and enterprise and imperialism.

As a white man

In an article considering the whiteness of sexual politics, and referring to an earlier article of mine, Helen (charles) observes: 'I have often wondered whether white people *know* they are white. I know that Richard Dyer does' (1993: 99; see also (charles) 1992).

Her remark set me thinking. Why was I trying to write about whiteness? I embarked on it because I thought it needed doing and, when I started, thought nobody else was doing it. Yet this does not of itself explain what (charles) identifies as the prerequisite for doing it, the awareness of being white. Given that, in the West, being white is not an issue for most white people, not a conscious or reflected on part of their sense of who they are, how come it was for me?

I won't pretend to come up with a total explanation of this, since it must be caught up in individual particularities so particular as to be of little general interest. However, if I try to trace the personal/cultural coalescence which goes some way towards accounting for my sense of myself as white, I can sum it up as follows. I seem from a very early age to have had a feeling for non-white people, a feeling something like kinship; yet there were moments when, for some reason or other, I suddenly realised that I really was not kin, and it was thus that I really realised I was white.

My mother recently told me a story about myself that she had never related before. I was brought up in a suburb of London, in a period (the late 1940s and early 1950s) in which there were relatively few non-white people in Britain. I went to a nursery school. One day a black boy came to class and was teased unmercifully by the other children. I, however, took his side, told the teachers that I would be his friend and took him home to tea. Since I don't myself remember this incident, I cannot claim to know what feelings I had at the time, but I cannot help speculating. I remember being very happy at nursery school, but I knew that I was regarded as a funny little boy, chiefly because I preferred playing with dolls and flowers to guns and cars. Perhaps I felt an affinity between myself and another boy who was funny because, albeit for a different reason, he too was not like the other boys.

This is to read back into an incident I don't recall something that I only consciously formulated in late adolescence. The key figure here was a Jewish boy at school, whom I'll call Danny Marker. I used to visit him and his family in Golders Green, a Jewish neighbourhood of London. I knew by then that I was a homosexual and I envied Danny and his family – they too were an oppressed minority, whom, like queers, you could not always spot; but, unlike us, they had this wonderful, warm community and culture and the wrongfulness of their oppression was socially recognised. I now believe that there are intellectual and political problems with making an analogy between Jews and queers, between ethnic and sexual discriminations, but I am trying to say how it felt then. I envied Danny's ethnicity and wanted to be part of it, indeed felt at home with it – except that there were always those moments, when I was offered some specially bought ham, for instance, or when Danny couldn't come out because it was the Sabbath, moments that made me realise that I was not a Jew, was not in fact at home.

I think at that stage I would have said that it was merely because I was a queer, not because I was a gentile or white. That came later, but I need to say something more here about the sexual dimension. I had a crush on Danny. My feeling for non-white people has sometimes taken an erotic form. There is a discourse of white bawdy, not much different in its straight or gay versions, that posits an elemental attraction of some white people to non-white people, the 'you're only interested in blacks because you like big cocks' kind of thing. The sexualisation of my feeling for some non-white men has undoubtedly lent intensity and poignancy to my awareness of race, but I do believe that it is an eroticisation of a much wider feeling, expressed not least in friendships with non-white women and men as well as in many aspects of my cultural life. It is the felt connection between gays and ethnic minorities that is important here, as much as romantic and sexual encounters with non-white men.

The fact that Danny did not reciprocate my crush on him perhaps defended me from imagining I could be more integrated into his world than I was; my feeling remained envy. It was later that, through involvement in a mixed-race gay political group and a relationship with an African-American man, that I experienced most strongly both the desire to be at one with non-white people and the recognition that I would never be exactly that, because I was white. The moment that crystallised it had to do with dancing. Living in New York at the time (1980), I went out dancing a lot with black friends to black venues; I had a black music radio station on all the time; I could not have been more into it. At one mixed-race social event, we all started dancing in a formation copied from the TV series *Soul Train*, two lines facing each other, which we took it in turns to dance down between. For all my love of dancing and funk, I have never felt more white than when I danced down between those lines. I know it was stereotypes in my head; I know plenty of black people who can't dance; I know perceptions of looseness and tightness of the body are dubious. All I can say is that at that moment, the black guys all looked loose and I felt tight. The notion of whiteness having to do with tightness, with self-control, self-consciousness, mind over body, is something I explore below. I felt it, and hated it, dancing between the lines – and hated it not for itself, but because it brought home to me that, in my very limbs, I had not the kinship with black people that I wanted to have.

This then perhaps says something about why I was sensitised to myself as white. It does not however say how I feel about it. If anything, it says too much, implies that I hate and resent it. But this is not the case and never has been. For one thing, I have also always known which side my bread is buttered on. I know I won't be stopped for long at immigration controls; I know I'll be respectfully served in shops, banks and restaurants; I know that, with class and gender also on my side, it is not really surprising that I now have a good job and a nice house and I certainly don't scorn to have

such things. And, while my love of Jewish, black and also Indian cultural forms remains as strong as ever, my cultural tastes certainly happily embrace very white things too, not least some things discussed in this book: the incandescent white faces of the movies, glisteningly muscular white male bodies, the touchingly awkward white melancholia of *The Jewel in the Crown*.

Nor am I immune to white racism. It comes unbidden, when I am off guard. Most commonly it's when I am driving, when, that is, I am both most tense (driving is dangerous to the point of insanity) and most distracted (the mind wanders and the music plays). If someone suddenly pulls out or blinks their lights for me to get out of the way when I myself am already driving at or over the speed limit, then at such moments self-righteous scorn and despair at the human race well up, uncensored. If I catch sight of the driver, then up pops a correlation between race, and gender, and bad driving. I'm shocked by it each time, by the fact that the correlation is so very readily to hand, but it doesn't stop it from coming along the next time.

Two things need to be said about this. The first is that I make a correlation whatever the race and gender of the person. Indeed, my contempt for bad white male drivers is far stronger than for any other category of person, partly because I am less likely instantly to correct it in my mind. I am not ashamed to think white masculinity a menace. Equally, I suspect that if I could tell the person's sexuality, I'd make something of that, including blaming bad driving on the feather-brained silliness of gay men. Second, I don't believe that such thoughts are a 'real me' lurking behind a facade of anti-racism. I did not invent racist thought, it is part of the cultural non-consciousness that we all inhabit.⁶ One must take responsibility for it, but that is not the same as being responsible, that is, to blame for it. The shock of its arrival, however, in the context of the feelings of kinship that I have described, further forces upon me my sense of being, after all, white.

As my discussion of racism suggests, how one thinks and feels is at once lived as intensely personal, yet made up of matters that in themselves are not unique to one. I have so far spoken mainly in personal terms, attempting to reconstruct the processes of feeling that both account for and situate the fact that I am writing, that this white man is writing about the representation of whiteness. Yet this itself can be placed in two wider contexts: gay culture and identity politics.

Though I experienced making the connection between being gay and being Jewish or black as a purely individual perception, a glance at gay culture suggests that it is not a surprising one to make. Disco music is rooted in black funk. Camp and Jewish humour have many affinities of irony and self-deprecation. Gay, Jewish and even a surprising amount of black storytelling returns repeatedly to the passing (for straight, for gentile,

for white) narrative. Even the complex, far from unproblematic relations of talismanic white gay men like André Gide or E. M. Forster with Arab and Indian men may be understood in terms of mutual recognition and discovery as well as sexual tourism and exploitation (cf. Bakshi 1994).

Second, it is striking that the recent writings by white people about whiteness arise predominantly out of feminism (Frye 1983, McIntosh 1988, Ware 1992, Frankenberg 1993), labour history (Saxton 1990, Roediger 1991, 1994) and lesbian and gay studies (Hart 1994, Davy 1995, the present work), in other words, what has come to be called identity politics. Each of these is founded on an affirmation of the needs and rights of a group defined in terms of, respectively, gender, class and sexuality. Crucial to such affirmation is the construction of a sense of oneness with a social grouping: women, the working class, lesbians and gay men. It is most recognisable in the opening phrases 'As a woman . . .', 'As a working class person . . .', 'As a lesbian . . .', which often serve to authenticate the truth of the view that follows by claiming it as a group view. The history of identity politics has however been marked by the increasingly strong and heard voices of, for instance, non-white and working-class women, lesbians and gay men, who do not entirely recognise themselves in these 'As a . . . ' claims. Many such claims have come to be seen as having been all along the claims of white women, the white working class, white lesbians and gay men. The effect of this has been to force white people in these movements back on to our racial particularity, thus making possible white reflections on whiteness.

The politics of looking at whiteness

I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

Whether I use cheques, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

The above is a selection from a list drawn up by Peggy McIntosh of forty-six

special circumstances and conditions I experience which I did not earn but which I have been made to feel are mine by birth, by citizenship,

and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding 'normal' person of goodwill.

(McIntosh 1988: 5-9)

This happens because white people are systematically privileged in Western society, enjoy 'unearned advantage and conferred dominance' (ibid.: 14). It is this privilege and dominance that is at stake in analysing white racial imagery.

McIntosh starts from the recognition that white people don't see their white privilege, which acts like 'an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear and blank cheques' (ibid.: 1-2). The invisibility of these assets is part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content. This is one of the feelings most commonly expressed by the white women interviewed by Ruth Frankenberg in her study of white identity. She notes that 'many of the women said that they "did not have a culture"' (Frankenberg 1993: 192): culture, distinctive identity, one might say colour, tended to be felt as add-ons to an identity that is not itself distinctive or coloured, that lacks 'flavour' (ibid.: 197). As one woman (Cathy Thomas) vividly and wittily put it, 'To be a Heinz 57 American, a white, class-confused American, land of the Kleenex type American, is so formless in and of itself' (ibid.: 191).

Having no content, we can't see that we have anything that accounts for our position of privilege and power. This is itself crucial to the security with which we occupy that position. As Peggy McIntosh argues, a white person is taught to believe that all that she or he does, good and ill, all that we achieve, is to be accounted for in terms of our individuality. It is intolerable to realise that we may get a job or a nice house, or a helpful response at school or in hospitals, because of our skin colour, not because of the unique, achieving individual we must believe ourselves to be.

But this then is why it is important to come to see whiteness. For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it. As I suggested in my opening paragraphs, the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power. White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. Most of this is not done deliberately and maliciously; there are enormous variations of power amongst white people, to do with class, gender and other factors; goodwill is not unheard of in white people's

engagement with others. White power none the less reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange.

There is a political need to do this, but there are also problematic political feelings attendant on it, which need to be briefly signalled in order to be guarded against. The first of these is the green light problem. Writing about whiteness gives white people the go-ahead to write and talk about what in any case we have always talked about: ourselves. In, at any rate, intellectual and educational life in the West in recent years there have been challenges to the dominance of white concerns and a concomitant move towards inclusion of non-white cultures and issues. Putting whiteness on the agenda now might permit a sigh of relief that we white people don't after all any longer have to take on all this non-white stuff.

Related to this is the problem of 'me-too-ism', a feeling that, amid all this (*all this?*) attention being given to non-white subjects, white people are being left out. One version of this is simply the desire to have attention paid to one, which for whites is really only the wish to have all the attention once again. Another is the sense that being white is no great advantage, what with being so uptight, out of touch with our bodies, burdened with responsibilities we didn't ask for. Poor us. A third variant is the notion of white men, specifically, as a new victim group, oppressed by the gigantic strides taken by affirmative action policies, can't get jobs, can't keep women, a view identified and thus hardened up by a *Newsweek* cover story on 5 September 1993 on white male paranoia.

The green light and me-too-ism echo the reaction of some men to feminism. There is a lesson here. My blood runs cold at the thought that talking about whiteness could lead to the development of something called 'White Studies', that studying whiteness might become part of what Mike Phillips suspects is 'a new assertiveness... amounting to a statement of "white ethnicity", the acceptable face of white nationalism' (1993: 30)⁷ or what Philip Norman (1992) identifies as a 1990s fascist chic observable in Calvin Klein and Häagen-Dazs ads as well as the rise of neo-fascist parties in Europe and North America. I dread to think that paying attention to whiteness might lead to white people saying they need to get in touch with their whiteness, that we might end up with the white equivalent of 'Iron John' and co, the 'men's movement' embrace of hairiness replaced with strangled vowels and rigid salutes. The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less, to make a show of reinstating it, when, like male power, it doesn't actually need reinstating).

A third problem about talking about whiteness is guilt. The kind of white people who are going to talk about being white, apart from conscious racists

who have always done so, are liable to be those sensitised to racism and the history of what white people have done to non-white peoples. Accepting ourselves as white and knowing that history, we are likely to feel overwhelmed with guilt at what we have done and are still doing.⁸ Guilt tends to be a blocking emotion. One wants to acknowledge so much how awful white people have been that one may never get around to examining what exactly they have been, and in particular, how exactly their image has been constructed, its complexities and contradictions. This problem – common to all 'images of' analyses – is a special temptation for white people. We may lacerate ourselves with admission of our guilt, but that bears witness to the fineness of a moral spirit that can feel such guilt – the display of our guilt is our calvary.⁹

A political problem of a different order has to do with what term to use to refer to (images of) people who are not white. In most contexts, one would not want to make such sweeping reference to so generalised a category, but in the present context of trying to see the specificity of whiteness it is sometimes necessary. I have opted for the term non-white. This is problematic because of its negativity, as if people who are not white only have identity by virtue of what they are not; it is not a term that I would want to see used in other contexts. However, the two common alternatives pose greater problems for my purposes. 'Black', the term preferred by many theorists and activists, has two drawbacks. First, it excludes a huge range of people who are neither white nor black, Asians, Native Americans (North and South), Chicanos, Jews and so on. Second, it reinforces the dichotomy of black : white that underpins racial thought but which it should be our aim to dislodge. Black is a privileged term in the construction of white racial imagery and I shall examine it as such, but where I need to see whiteness in relation to all peoples who are not white, 'black' will not do. The other option would be 'people of colour', the preferred US term (though with little currency in Britain). While I have always appreciated this term's generosity, including in it all those people that 'black' excludes, it none the less reiterates the notion that some people have colour and others, whites, do not. We need to recognise white as a colour too, and just one among many, and we cannot do that if we keep using a term that reserves colour for anyone other than white people. Reluctantly, I am forced back on 'non-white'.

Politics also inform more evidently methodological questions. When I first started thinking about studying the representation of whiteness, I soon realised that what one could not do was the kind of taxonomy of typifications that had been done for non-white peoples. (One cannot come up with a limited range of endlessly repeated images, because the privilege of being white in white culture is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one's whiteness. White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability and so on, but the overt point of such typification

is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled),¹⁰ is to be white. White people in their whiteness, however, are imaged as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex and changing. There are also gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics; indeed, if Jews are white at all, it is only Ashkenazi Jews, since the Holocaust, in a few places.

The individuated, multifarious and graded character of white representation does not mean that white culture has succeeded in imagining in white people the plenitude of human potential and is only at fault for denying this representational range to non-white people. There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception. The same is true of all representation – the taxonomic study of stereotypes was only ever an initial step in the study of non-white representation. However, stereotyping – complex and contradictory though it is (cf. Perkins 1979, Bhabha 1983, Dyer 1993a) – does characterise the representation of subordinated social groups and is one of the means by which they are categorised and kept in their place, whereas white people in white culture are given the illusion of their own infinite variety.

For a long time, the multiplicity of white representation led me to feel that any generalisation I made about images of white people could always be countered by other, various and opposite images of them, that the image of the pure white woman discussed in Chapter 3, for instance, is easily placed alongside that of the wicked or the merely venial white woman, that the muscleman heroes of Chapter 4 were, if anything, less typical of whiteness than the average white guys of major stars like James Stewart, Harrison Ford or Tom Hanks. Moreover, going against type is a feature of white representation. At the level of textual form, it is the foundation of both psychological realism – when we don't get superheroes or obvious stereotypes, we feel we're getting the real – and of novelty and transgression, where the bounds of the typical are exceeded. At the level of social mores, the right not to conform, to be different and get away with it, is the right of the most privileged groups in society. However, going against type and not conforming depend upon an implicit norm of whiteness against which to go. It is that norm which is my concern in this book.

Equally, given the variety of whiteness, I have sometimes thought that what I am really writing about is the whiteness of the English, Anglo-Saxons or North Europeans (and their descendants), that this whiteness would be unrecognisable to Southern or Eastern Europeans (and their descendants). For much of the past two centuries, North European whiteness has been

hegemonic within a whiteness that has none the less been assumed to include Southern and Eastern European peoples (albeit sometimes grudgingly within Europe¹¹ and less assuredly without it, in, for instance, the Latin diaspora of the Americas). It is this overarching hegemonic whiteness which concerns me, one to which Northern Europeans most easily lay claim but which is not to be conflated with distinctive North European identities.

As others have found, it often seems that the only way to see the structures, tropes and perceptual habits of whiteness, to see past the illusion of infinite variety, to recognise white *qua* white, is when non-white (and above all black) people are also represented. My initial stab at the topic of whiteness (Dyer 1988) approached it through three films which were centrally about white-black interactions, and my account above of how I may have got into thinking about the topic at all also emphasises the role of non-white people in my life. Similarly, Toni Morrison in her study of whiteness in American literature, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), focuses on the centrality, indeed inescapability, of black representation to the construction of white identity, a perception shared by the very influential work of Edward Said (1978) on the West's construction of an 'Orient' by means of which to make sense of itself. This is more than saying that one can only really see the specificity of one's culture by realising that it could be otherwise, in itself an unobjectionable human process. What the work of Morrison, Said *et al.* suggests is that white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space of autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means for knowing the white self. This cultural process justifies the emphasis, in work on the representation of white people, on the role of images of non-white people in it.

Yet this emphasis has also worried me, writing from a white position. If I continue to see whiteness only in texts in which there are also non-white people, am I not reproducing the relegation of non-white people to the function of enabling me to understand myself? Do I not do analytically what the texts themselves do? Moreover, while this is certainly the usual function of black images in white texts,¹² to focus exclusively on those texts that are 'about' racial difference and interaction risks giving the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white, whereas whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness in all texts all of the time. As a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination, but that is true of all texts, not just those that take such matters as their explicit subject matter. Similarly, as I argue later in this chapter, there is implicit racial resonance to the idea, endemic to the representation of white heterosexuality, of sexual desire as itself dark, but in Chapter 3 I deliberately show this in relation to white couples in white contexts rather than looking at texts about inter-racial sexuality. The point is to see the

is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled),¹⁰ is to be white. White people in their whiteness, however, are imaged as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex and changing. There are also gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics; indeed, if Jews are white at all, it is only Ashkenazi Jews, since the Holocaust, in a few places.)

The individuated, multifarious and graded character of white representation does not mean that white culture has succeeded in imagining in white people the plenitude of human potential and is only at fault for denying this representational range to non-white people. There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception. The same is true of all representation – the taxonomic study of stereotypes was only ever an initial step in the study of non-white representation. However, stereotyping – complex and contradictory though it is (cf. Perkins 1979, Bhabha 1983, Dyer 1993a) – does characterise the representation of subordinated social groups and is one of the means by which they are categorised and kept in their place, whereas white people in white culture are given the illusion of their own infinite variety.

For a long time, the multiplicity of white representation led me to feel that any generalisation I made about images of white people could always be countered by other, various and opposite images of them, that the image of the pure white woman discussed in Chapter 3, for instance, is easily placed alongside that of the wicked or the merely venial white woman, that the musclemen heroes of Chapter 4 were, if anything, less typical of whiteness than the average white guys of major stars like James Stewart, Harrison Ford or Tom Hanks. Moreover, going against type is a feature of white representation. At the level of textual form, it is the foundation of both psychological realism – when we don't get superheroes or obvious stereotypes, we feel we're getting the real – and of novelty and transgression, where the bounds of the typical are exceeded. At the level of social mores, the right not to conform, to be different and get away with it, is the right of the most privileged groups in society. However, going against type and not conforming depend upon an implicit norm of whiteness against which to go. It is that norm which is my concern in this book.

Equally, given the variety of whiteness, I have sometimes thought that what I am really writing about is the whiteness of the English, Anglo-Saxons or North Europeans (and their descendants), that this whiteness would be unrecognisable to Southern or Eastern Europeans (and their descendants). For much of the past two centuries, North European whiteness has been

hegemonic within a whiteness that has none the less been assumed to include Southern and Eastern European peoples (albeit sometimes grudgingly within Europe¹¹ and less assuredly without it, in, for instance, the Latin diaspora of the Americas). It is this overarching hegemonic whiteness which concerns me, one to which Northern Europeans most easily lay claim but which is not to be conflated with distinctive North European identities.

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specificity of whiteness, even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn't even know that it is there to be shown.¹³ I do make reference to non-white in my analyses in order to clarify the specificity of white, and I do look at texts with implicit (the peplum) or explicit (*The Jewel in the Crown*) colonial structures, since colonialism is one of the elements that subtends the construction of white identity. But I have eschewed a focus on non-white characters as projections of white imaginings, as the Other to the white person who is really the latter's unknown or forbidden self. This function, as the work of Morrison and others makes abundantly clear, is indeed characteristic of white culture, but it is not the whole story and may reinforce the notion that whiteness is only racial when it is 'marked' by the presence of the truly raced, that is, non-white subject.

The embodiment of whiteness

I have tried so far in this chapter to sketch some of the personal, political and methodological starting points for what follows. I turn now to a particular aspect of white representation, the notion of embodiment, that underpins and generates the particular forms and texts examined in the rest of this book.

To represent people is to represent bodies. In the chapters that follow I consider particular aspects of the bodies of white people in representation: skin colour (Chapter 2), how such bodies are rendered by the aesthetic technologies of light (3), the muscular white male body in adventure fictions (4), the narrative (in)capacities of the white feminine body (5) and the deathliness of the white body (6). Here what I want to suggest is that all of these involve a wider notion of the white body, of embodiment, of whiteness involving something that is in but not of the body. I approach this through three elements of its constitution: Christianity, 'race' and enterprise/imperialism. These do not just provide the intellectual foundations for thinking and feeling about the white body, but also their forms and structures, the cultural register of whiteness.

Christianity (and the particular inflection it gives to Western dualist thought) is founded on the idea – paradoxical, unfathomable, profoundly mysterious – of incarnation, of being that is in the body yet not of it. This provides a compelling cosmology, as well as a vivid imagery and set of narrative tropes, that survive as characteristics of Western culture. All concepts of *race*, emerging out of eighteenth-century materialism, are concepts of bodies, but all along they have had to be reconciled with notions of embodiment and incarnation. The latter become what distinguish white people, giving them a special relation to race. Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal,

or racial. It is in this context that I look at a third element of whiteness: *imperialism*. At some point, the embodied something else of whiteness took on a dynamic relation to the physical world, something caught by the ambiguous word 'spirit'. The white spirit organises white flesh and in turn non-white flesh and other material matters: it has *enterprise*. Imperialism is the key historical form in which that process has been realised. Imperialism displays both the character of enterprise in the white person, and its exhilaratingly expansive relationship to the environment. These then are the elements I use to structure the rest of this chapter.

Embodiment: Christianity

The European feeling for self and the world has been shaped by Christianity, a religion whose sensibility is focused on the body. If Christianity as observance and belief has been in decline in Europe over the past half-century, its ways of thinking and feeling are none the less still constitutive of both European culture and consciousness and the colonies and ex-colonies (notably the USA) that it has spawned. Many of the fundamentals of all levels of Western culture – the forms of parenting, especially motherhood, and sex, the value of suffering, guilt, the shock of post-Enlightenment materialism – come to us from Christianity, whether or not we know the Bible story or recognise the specific items of Christian iconography. The Christian structures of feeling are realised in concrete images and stories, for that itself is in the nature of Christianity, and those images and stories centre on the body, or rather, on embodiment.

The body is the basis of Christian imagery, notably in the two great set pieces of the birth and death of Christ, the nativity and the crucifixion, brought together, as Elaine Scarry notes (1985: 216), in the pietà, the dead Christ stretched across his mother Mary's lap, an image simultaneously of cradling and death. These basic figures have been endlessly remade in Western culture, in painting, sculpture, theatre (notably school nativity plays), cinema and television. The basic symbol of Christianity, the cross, is a shape that works itself ineluctably into the fabric of Western design and performance, the shape of an object whose significance is the body that was nailed to it. Such imagery forms the nodal points of the Christian sensibility: its sacred texts, calendar and rituals. While Christ himself and the books of the New Testament do sometimes deal in abstractions, the heart of Christianity is concrete storytelling: Christ's life and the parables, the stories that he himself told. What the sacred texts are most memorably about is people doing things, birth and death but also working and feeding: Christ as carpenter and as shepherd; Christ drinking and offering his body in the form of food and wine; miracles of bodily transformation and corporeal nourishment, water into wine, a few loaves and fishes feeding five

White as a designated hue has come to have one other remarkable quality: it has an opposite, black. Of no other colours is this so: green is not the opposite of red, nor blue of yellow. This perception is shored up by the notion that Leonardo and Rood (and most Western theorists of colour) refer to, namely that white is light and black its absence. The idea of absolute colour opposites, apparently given by nature and of a piece with dualistic thought, is especially important when conjugated with ideas of whiteness as skin and symbol.

Skin

White as a skin colour is also a category that is internally variable and unclear at the edges. For much of history, many white people have sought to make themselves look white of hue and I shall give an account of this first. However, not being really of one hue means that whiteness may also be seen as multiplicitous and expressively dynamic. It also, as I go on to argue, makes it amenable to being, within bounds, a matter of ascription – white people are who white people say are white. This has a profoundly controlling effect.

Michel Chevreul, whose work on colour is among the most elaborated in Western culture, wrote at length (in his 1839 *De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs*) of the effect of clothes of different hue on white women's colouring and in the process specified a huge range of 'white skins' that had to be taken into account, including 'more red than rosy', 'a tint of orange mixed with brown', 'more yellow than orange', 'a little blue' and so on (in Sloan 1991: 27–8). Such variability has however been resisted by many white people, especially the royal, aristocratic and wealthy.

Much of the history of Western make-up is a history of whitening the face. Marina Warner (1994: 368) notes the legend of Cleopatra bathing in asses' milk to whiten her skin and recipes for bleaching hair and whitening the complexion in Gianbattista Della Porta's chapter on 'How to Adorn Women, and make them Beautiful' in his *Natural Magick* (1658). One of the most strongly, and probably to us now startlingly, white cosmetics, in use from the time of the ancient Greeks until the early nineteenth century, was ceruse (white lead), which both made the wearer look matt white and poisoned the skin. Ceruse was replaced by rice powder in the nineteenth century, which was intended actually to whiten (not just cover) the skin. The success of Helena Rubinstein's cosmetics was based on her own appearance, described as both milky and like alabaster, which was supposedly the product of the creams she used (Angeloglou 1970: 109).

Painters and photographers have often rendered white people entirely or in large part literally white. The convention of both line drawing and black and white photography depends upon a readiness to take the literally white

graphic face as a rendering of the socially white face, and even oil painting and colour photography may use white in one form or another (pigment, exposure, retouching, for instance). Whistler's *Symphony in White No 3* (1865–7) (colour Plate 2), with its barest suggestion of pinkness to the skin offsetting the whites of dress and setting, might even be an ironic comment on a work like Reynolds's *Portrait of a Lady* (c.1767–9) (colour Plate 3), where the woman's skin really is barely less white than either her clothes, hat and pearls or the effects of light in which she is bathed. There is of course nothing exceptional or extreme about either work.

Just as there is a history of skin white people having tried to make themselves hue white, so, more recently, there is a history of white people darkening themselves through tanning. It seems that this phenomenon only occurs in relation to white women in the twentieth century, and even before that time, tanned white male skin was only sometimes prized as a sign of manliness, of vigour and enterprise, since it was also associated with peasants and working-class labour. In the twentieth century, tanning became a cosmetic: even when caused by the sun, it generally involved any amount of ointments, and it can in practice be achieved through artificial rays as well as creams and pills. The most conscious association of tanning is with healthiness, a belief in the beneficence of the sun's rays (doing for the skin what they do for the fruits of the earth), of the outdoor life, fresh air, exercise. It is also associated with leisure, with time not devoted to work and the necessities of life, with travel and living away from home, and therefore, in connection with all of these, with money. Much less consciously – and quite possibly often not at all – does it have to do with non-white peoples (or, more precisely, the colour range encompassed by Latin, Arab, South Asian and African peoples, since becoming 'red' or 'yellow' has never, yet, been widely prized by whites). In becoming darker, white people may wish to take on some of the imputed characteristics of dark people, characteristics themselves related to the associations of such people in some discourses with healthiness and leisure. Thus dark people work the land and are somehow more natural, dark people have the sensuality and fun sought in leisure and so on. The desire 'to be black' – vividly expressed in white people's relationship to black music and dance – may well inform the fashion for tanning, but the point about tanning is that the white person never does become black. A tanned white person is just that – a white person who has acquired a darker skin. There is no loss of prestige in this. On the contrary, not only does he or she retain the signs of whiteness (suggesting, once again, that skin colour is not really just a matter of the colour of skin), not only does tanning bespeak a wealth and life style largely at white people's disposition, but it also displays white people's right to be various, literally to incorporate into themselves features of other peoples.

Black people's use of skin lighteners are not so positively viewed. Like tanning, these are harmful, but unlike tanning their harmfulness is stressed

as a terrible warning to black people who try to be various. As with tanning, a black person who uses lighteners does not succeed in passing him or herself off as a member of another race – but unlike tanning, this is presumed to be the aim of their use, and the failure to achieve this aim is a source of ridicule. (This itself is a familiar trope of white fiction, the fun made of the black or native character who tries to behave like a lady or gentleman.)¹¹ Few things have delighted the white press as much as the disfigurement of Michael Jackson's face through what have been supposed to be his attempts to become white.

As the example of tanning suggests, variability of hue within a none the less socially guaranteed whiteness is as much a characteristic of the discourse of white skin colour as attempts to make it literally white. For some, the white face has inherently more variation than any other, not just in the kind of range of hues described by Chevreul, but in expressive colour alterations, so that it is redolent of the enterprising white values of dynamism, flexibility and the capacity to change. Thus Thomas Jefferson wrote (in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781–2)):

Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one [race], preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?

(quoted in Jordan 1977: 458)

Similarly, in 1840 the translator (Charles Locke Eastlake) of the *Farbenlehre* (1810) qualifies Goethe's statement that whites are the most beautiful people because they are of no particular colour by saying that the same could be said of blacks and that what it 'would be safer to say' is 'that the white skin is more beautiful than the black, because it is more capable of indications of life, and indications of emotion' (Goethe 1840: 416).

Variation and alteration, whether in whitening and tanning or the effect of the emotions, indicate that whiteness is more an ascription than a fixed given. One of the earliest instances of the term white to designate a social group (as given by the *OED*) simultaneously registers that it can be inappropriate in terms of colour:

There may be about 2000 Whites (or I should say Portuguese, for they are none of the whitest) and about treble that Number of Slaves.

(*Adventures of Captain Robert Boyle* (1726))

White people are socially categorised as white because of what white means (here, not being a slave) rather than because that is the most accurate term to describe our skin colour.

There are many examples of the ascription of whiteness. Both Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa, for instance, gave the Japanese the status of 'honorary whites' (Bernal 1987: 403–4 and Goldberg 1993: 165, respectively). Hitler despised the dark Italians yet made common cause with Mussolini in championing the Aryan race, while Italian fascist propaganda produced an ideal type of the Italian male who looked little like the average Italian (Plate 2.3). Even away from such examples, and to speak appropriately in the language of stereotypes, a red-haired, red-cheeked Irish colleen, a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, snow-bronzed Scandinavian and a dark-eyed Latin lover may all be deemed white.

Maybe. For the relative fluidity of white as a skin colour functions in relation to the notion of whiteness as a coalition, with a border and an internal hierarchy (as discussed in Chapter 1). Whiteness can determine who is to be included and excluded from the category and also discriminate among those deemed to be within it. Some people – the Irish, Latins, Jews – are white sometimes, and some white people are whiter than others.

As already noted, white is virtually unthinkable except in opposition to black. This has been as true of skin as of hue white. As Mary Hamer (1996) points out, in nineteenth-century racial thought, notably the writings of John Knox, there is a profoundly felt need for an absolute racial distinction between black and white. One function of the exaggerations of blackface,¹² and the film stereotypes of African-Americans in large measure drawn from it,¹³ was to make very clear and sharp the difference between black and white races.



Plate 2.3 A count palatine representing the 'tipico biondo di razza italiana' ('typical blonde of the Italian race'), *La difesa della razza* (The Defence of the Race) (journal) c.1938

Yet only Caucasians and Negroes have been felt to fit comfortably into these polarities. Other groups cannot be so tidily accommodated by the schemum. That is its strength. If there are only two colours that really count, then which you belong to becomes a matter of the greatest significance. Theodore Allen (1994: 154) quotes a commentator in *The Richmond Observer* of 4 May 1832, to the effect that poor whites at this time had 'little but their complexion to console them for being born into a higher caste'. As Allen shows, they did have one or two other privileges but nothing to speak of in terms of property or economic security. Yet their complexion, it seems, was consolation enough. A white complexion is a kind of promise to the bearer that he or she may have access to privilege, power and wealth (not to mention, in the context, as here, of the US South, of access to jobs in the rapidly industrialising North).

Given the overwhelming advantage of being white, in terms of power, privilege and material well-being, who counts as white and who doesn't is worth fighting over – fighting to keep people out, to let strategic groups in, fighting to get in. Two examples of peoples who have counted as white under particular historical circumstances are the Irish and the Jews. In both cases, their treatment has involved an appeal to 'colour'.

For much of British history, the Irish have been looked down on as black (cf. Lebow 1976). Liz Curtis (1984: 55) instances the work of the nineteenth-century physician John Beddoe who

invented the 'index of nigrescence', a formula to identify the racial components of a given people. He concluded that the Irish were darker than the people of eastern and central England, and were closer to the aborigines of the British Isles, who in turn had traces of 'negro' ancestry in their appearances.

Curtis also supplies an illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, visually demonstrating the 'African' looks of the Irish (Plate 2.4). With the rise of the Fenian movement for Irish liberation, British representation of the black Irish intensified, notably through a comparison of the Irish with chimpanzees and gorillas, the first live specimen of the latter being brought to London in 1860 with great public success. The idea that the Irish could be looked on as the 'missing link' between apes and humans ran through both written and visual satire of the period. L. Perry Curtis Jr. (1971) speaks of a 'process of simianizing Paddy's features between 1840 and 1890', which did not die out until the mid-1920s and was as much used in the USA as in Britain. In one 1881 *Punch* cartoon (Plate 2.5), a stiffly upright, unblemished, white-faced Britannia is cast in the classic imperial role of protecting the good native (a straight-haired, white-limbed girl) against the hairy, gesticulating ape-like rebel native, while in an 1876 *Harper's Weekly* (Plate 2.6), black and Irish are both equated in the US context as members

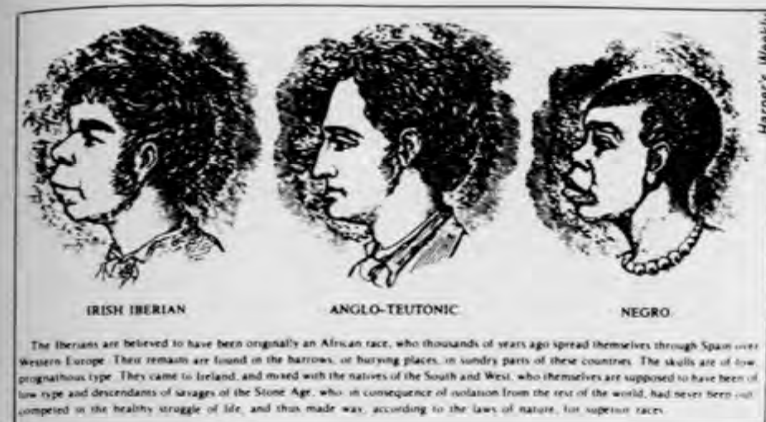


Plate 2.4 'Irish Iberian, Anglo-Teutonic, Negro' (*Harper's Weekly* mid-nineteenth century)

of what might today be called the political underclass. *Puck* 1880 shows both John Bull and Uncle Sam consulting over what to do with the marauding Irish ape (Plate 2.7).

Yet in other circumstances, the Irish could be seen as white, something stressed by both David Roediger (1991: 133ff.) and Theodore Allen (1994) in their histories of whiteness in the USA. There in the nineteenth century, in a country not in the same exploitative relation to Ireland as Britain was, the Irish were the sector of the immigrant working class who might be hailed as white as against the Native Americans, African slaves and even some other European migrants – the project of democracy and the common man could fasten on the (Northern European, famously Christian) Irish as evidence of an openness and including-in which did not need to extend beyond this white boundary.

Throughout Western history, the Jews have been in what Michael Lerner calls 'a position of structural instability'. They have

repeatedly been offered a devil's deal by European societies: You can move out of the position of the 'most oppressed' if you become the public face of oppression to the rest of society, the middle men (and, increasingly, women) who will represent the elites of wealth and power to the powerless.

(1993: 33)

Not least because of their role in the Christ story – Christ was a Jew, but the Jews rejected him; they could have been, perhaps still could be, white – the Jews have constituted the limit case of whiteness. Their racial visibility



Plate 2.5 John Tenniel 'Two Forces' (Punch 29 October 1881)

was long thought to be indisputable. Sander Gilman details the tradition of representing Jews in terms of physiognomic difference, including skin, eye and hair colour. However, as he notes, there was a countervailing tendency, which argued that Jews in fact varied in appearance according to geography. Scientists began to demonstrate that Jews were 'the adaptive people par excellence' (1991: 177). Already in 1787 Samuel Stanhope had argued thus: 'In Britain and Germany they are fair, brown in France and in Turkey, swarthy in Portugal and Spain, olive in Syria and Chaldea, tawny or copper-coloured in Arabia and Egypt' (quoted in *ibid.*).

HARPER'S WEEKLY

A JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION

Vol. 51. No. 1013

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1876

Price 10 Cents

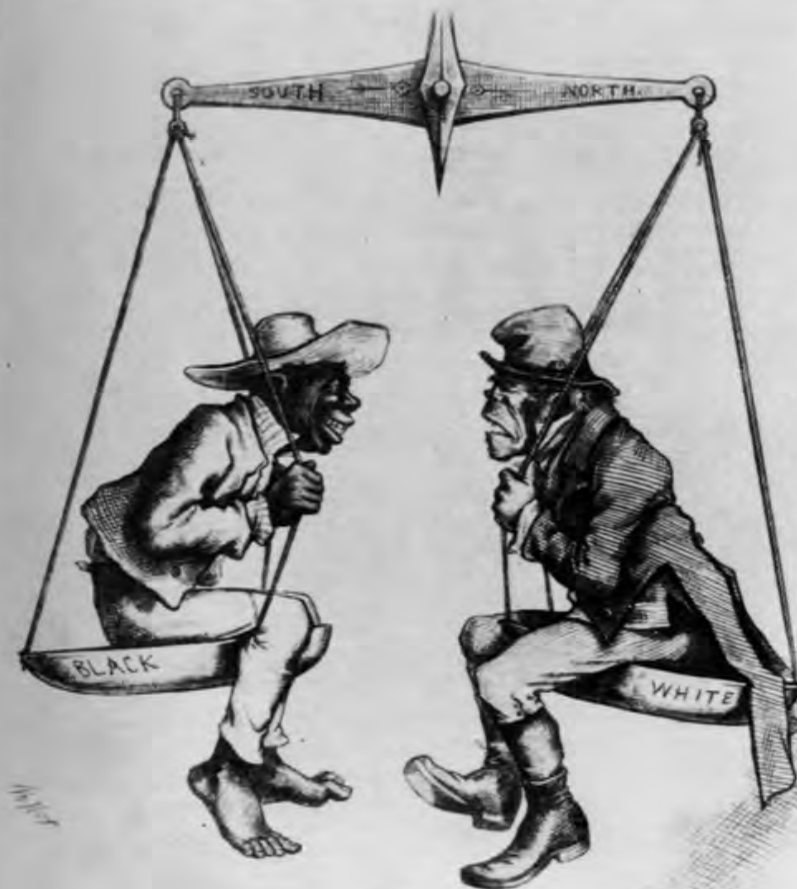


Plate 2.6 Thomas Nast 'The Ignorant Vote: Honors Are Easy' (Harper's Weekly 9 December 1876)



Plate 2.7 James A. Wales 'The Simian Irish Celt' (Puck 3 November 1880)

This description still tries to fix Jewish colour geographically, not according to the rich flux and variation of whiteness – it is adaptation, not inclusive colourlessness. None the less, it does suggest a conceptual closeness between Jewish and really white colouring. It is a closeness that has only sometimes worked to Jews' advantage. Adaptability could easily be viewed as the capacity to infiltrate, passing for gentile as a kind of corruption of whiteness. The uncertainty over their colour means that at different times Jews may be fully assigned to one or other side of the black:white divide. In Nazi Germany, Jews were regarded as black; in contemporary New York, most would be surprised to find themselves so categorised.

The instability of white as skin colour is not only a means for policing who at any given historical moment is going to be included in or out of the category, but also to differentiate within it, even among those whose racial identity is not in question. In representation, white men are darker than white women. On Greek vases the men are darker than the women,¹⁴ in Western painting (since the Middle Ages) Adonis is darker than Venus, Adam than Eve, indeed any male lover is darker than his female beloved (for the sake of illustration, take Titian's *The Three Ages of Man* (1512) (colour Plate 4) or Jens Juel's *The Ryberg Family Portrait* (1796–7) (colour Plate 1)). Whites may also be hue differentiated according to class. Working-class and peasant whites are darker than middle-class and aristocratic whites. Two portraits by the nineteenth-century Birmingham photographer Benjamin Stone, one (1896) of a charcoal burner (significantly enough, unnamed) and one (1905) of a Mr Smith, clearly a gentleman (Plates 2.8 and 2.9), show very clearly how much darker the working man is, something almost certainly true of the subject himself but enhanced by exposure, development and light (the natural light creates shadows on the charcoal burner, whereas in the studio these can be eliminated). In Chapter 4, I consider the way that, as befits an Everyman figure, the white muscleman hero's body is darker than that of upper-class men but lighter than that of native peoples.

Colour distinctions within whiteness have been understood in relation to labour. To work outside the home – literally out of doors but also away from the values of domesticity – is to be exposed to the elements, especially the sun and the wind, which darken white skin. In most hierarchical social systems, however much the toiler may be lauded in some traditions, the very dreariness and pain of their labour accords them lowly status: thus to be darker, though racially white, is to be inferior. Gender differentiation is crossed with that of class: lower-class women may be darker than upper-class men; to be a lady is to be as white as it gets.

In sum, white as a skin colour is just as unstable, unbounded a category as white as a hue, and therein lies its strength. It enables whiteness to be presented as an apparently attainable, flexible, varied category, while setting up an always movable criterion of inclusion, the ascribed whiteness of your skin.



Plate 2.8 Benjamin Stone Old Charcoal Burner, Worcestershire (1896)
(Benjamin Stone Collection, Birmingham Reference Library)

Symbol

Despite some national and historical variation, the basic symbolic connotation of white is fairly clear. Its most familiar form is the moral opposition of white = good and black = bad. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the seventh meaning of white both 'morally and spiritually pure' and 'free from malignity . . . esp. as opposed to something characterised as black', with examples from the tenth century ('Hwylc is of us Drihten baet haebbe swa



Plate 2.9 Benjamin Stone Mr. Smith in Grotesque Leather Chair (1905) (Benjamin Stone Collection, Birmingham Reference Library)

hwite saule swa beos halize Marie?' (the *Blickling Homilies*, 971)) to the nineteenth century ('It is I whose duty it is to see that your name be made white again' (Anthony Trollope, *Orley Farm*, 1862)).

This moral symbolism is used to differentiate between characters who belong to the same social skin group, without any apparent racial connotation. Skin hue *per se* may not be adduced: for instance, Marina Warner draws attention to the contrast between an always golden-haired Cinderella and the red, dark and raven-coloured hair of her sisters and stepmother (1994: 366). Dark-haired and swarthy white characters are routinely more often

wicked and/or sensual than fair-haired and light-complexioned ones. John Hodge (1990: 106) provides an example from children's toys:

Recently (1987) a fast-food restaurant that caters to children and is known throughout the world distributed toy robots to accompany one of its food offerings. The leader of the good robots was predominantly yellow. The bad robots were described as wicked and lazy. Their leader was the darkest of the robots, a dark bluish grey close to black.

The opposition can also work with non-white people. In *Dances with Wolves* (1990), a film self-consciously seeking to right the wrongful imagery of Native Americans in the Western, the bad Pawnee people are none the less of distinctly darker complexion than the good Sioux.

With the basic contrast in place, endless variations can be played. One of the traditional *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* collected by Francis James Child and published in 1882-4 is 'The Twa Sisters', in which a 'dark' older sister kills her 'fair' younger one. The latter has goaded the older in ways which, as Child says, may 'qualify our compassion for' her, as for instance, when she declares

Wash all day, and you will be no whiter than God made you,
Wash as white as you please, you will never get a lover.

(Child 1965: 120)

(We may note here the motif of washing and whiteness, something discussed further below.) Richard Jenkins (1980: 146) points to the contrast in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) between the plain, 'brown' Mary Garth and beautiful Rosamond Vincy, 'a sculptured Psyche' (white like a statue and suggesting spiritual values). However, it is Mary who is the good woman, who prefers the simple country life, whereas Rosamond is a social climber with little interest in morality. The contrast remains – white is beautiful and striving, dark is plain, placid, grounded, unadventurous. The dark:fair contrast is still in place in the already deviant context of a lesbian romance film like *Desert Hearts* (1985), in which uptight, intellectual, traditionally moral and straight Vivian is pale and fair, while raunchy, physical, artistic, promiscuous and lesbian Cay is dark (Plate 2.10) (cf. Stacey 1995: 104-5).¹⁵

White as a symbol, especially when paired with black, seems more stable than white as a hue or skin tone. It remains firmly in place at the level of language – most people find themselves saying things like 'everything has its darker side', 'it's just a little white lie' and 'that's a black mark against you'. Though we might mock the black and white hats for the villains and heroes respectively in early Westerns, for instance, the use of the oppositions in pictorial representation remains surprisingly widespread.



Plate 2.10 *Desert Hearts* (USA 1985): Cay (Patricia Charbonneau) and Vivian (Helen Shaver) (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

Slippages

There are thus three theoretically distinct senses of white. There does not have to be any slippage between them. The opposition of black and white need not carry racial or moral implications. Jordan (1977: 7) gives an example from Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765):

Everye white will have its blacke,
And everye sweete its sowre.

Unless sour is necessarily seen as a bad quality and is aligned (as it is in terms of word placement) with black, this seems merely to be making a point about opposites. Yet an example given by the *OED* of white meaning the opposite of black (and, in the *OED*'s terms, without other inference) suggests how readily slippage may occur:

I think they have striven if not to make an Ethiopian white, yet an Egyptian to speak truth concerning his own country.

(Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae; or a rational account of the grounds of the christian faith as to the truth and divine authority of the scriptures* (1662))

Here we can see clearly how one register slips into another. The first clause might be neutral enough: you cannot cause a person with black skin to acquire white skin – this both deploys the clear distinction of hue (black and white) and makes a statement of epidermal fact. Yet the second clause clearly refers to the lack of virtue of another race (dishonesty, chauvinism). Lay the two clauses on top of each other and it is easy to see how questions of colour elide with questions of morality. In theory, an Ethiopian (a black person) could represent virtue, but the Ethiopian and the Egyptian occupy the same grammatical position in their respective clauses (and both are non-white people). Neither of them can be made good (symbolically white) nor fair (hue white).

An example of such slippage occurs visually in the film *Beyond the Forest* (1949), in which Bette Davis plays the unrelievedly wicked – and sensual – central character, Rosa Moline (murderous, adulterous, selfish, deceitful, spiteful). She has jet black, shoulder-length hair, a signifier of evil that shrieks at one on the head of a star well known to have light brown hair. Of itself, this need involve no racial connotation but Rosa has an ‘Indian’ (Native



Plate 2.11 *Beyond the Forest* (USA 1949): Jenny (Doña Drake) and Rosa (Bette Davis) (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

American) cleaner, Jenny (Doña Drake). Like Rosa, Jenny is a reluctant domestic; she comes to work in a check shirt and trousers, garb for which Rosa upbraids her but which later in the film, she, Rosa, herself adopts; and both of them, in the very WASP little town where the action takes place, have the same shoulder-length, jet black hair. Thus the wickedness of Rosa is signified not only by recourse to a moral black:white antinomy but also by her suggested affinity with a racial inferior (Plates 2.11 and 2.12).

When I began thinking about the significance of white people being coloured white, I was resistant to too quick a conflation of hue, skin and symbol, and especially the idea that because we have a moral vocabulary such that white = good and black = bad we thus necessarily equate white people with goodness and black with evil. Any simple mapping of hue, skin and symbol on to one another is clearly not accurate. White people are far from being always represented as good, for instance. Yet I am now persuaded that the slippage between the three is more pervasive than I thought at first, to the extent that it does probably underlie all representation of white people. For a white person who is bad is failing to be ‘white’, whereas a black person who is good is a surprise, and one who is bad merely fulfils expectations.



Plate 2.12 *Beyond the Forest* (USA 1949): Rosa and husband (Joseph Cotten) (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

Bastide provides a striking example: 'In America, when a Negro is accepted, one often says, in order to separate him from the rest of his race, "He is a Negro, of course, but his soul is white"' (1967: 315). However profoundly mixed up and various the actual representations of black and white people are, the underlying regime of dualism is still in play.

Many of the uses of the word 'white' illustrate the slippage between white as hue, skin and symbol. Caroline Spurgeon, in a study of Shakespeare's use of symbols (1958), draws attention to his consistent use of white to suggest beauty and purity (and if I use Shakespeare here it is because, precisely because of its canonical status, his work has so profoundly shaped patterns of thought and feeling in the English language). Typically, something that is indisputably white is used figuratively to suggest a quality of something that barely is, most often white women's complexions. So in *Venus and Adonis*, Venus is said to be 'Teaching the sheets a whiter shade than white' (note again the suggestion of degrees of whiteness, true of the hue and the race), while *Cymbeline* has the lines:

Cytherea,
How bravely thou becomest thy bed! fresh lily!
And whiter than the sheets!

It is, hardly unexpectedly, in *Othello* that the racial equation is most strongly made. Iago's use of racist imagery to unsettle the reception of Othello is well known, but more revealing are Othello's own words, when he becomes convinced of Desdemona's treachery:

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

Here explicitly the value association of black is joined to the skin colour, perhaps as a conceit (especially given that it is put into the mouth of a black man of noble character), but revealing how easily such slippage can occur.

The conflation of symbolic and racial colour became most conscious (and unembarrassed) in the nineteenth century. The *OED* gives the following examples of white referring to light-complexioned people:

A good fellow is Rayner; as white a man as ever I knew.
(Sir Walter Besant and James Rice, *The Golden Butterfly*, 1877)

There ain't a whiter man than Laramie Jack from the Wind River
Mountains down to Santa Fe.

(*The Century Magazine*, February 1890)

Well – this is white of you.

(Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, 1913)

I mean to act white by you.

(ibid.)

To be white is to be at once of the white race and 'honourable' and 'square-dealing'.

The persistence of such slippages and the ground they provide for variation is not confined to the verbal. Albert Boime (1990: 3–4) discusses Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), scandalous in its time because it took the noble subject matter of the female nude and showed a naked woman who was very evidently a prostitute. As Boime suggests, those who commented on the presence of a black maid in the painting generally did so in terms of the way her hue made a formal contrast with the main subject, but her blackness is also racially expressive: she is a domestic servant, her head-dress identifies her as West Indian, her relationship to the white nude figure literally embodies imperialism. Yet sexuality is explicitly associated here with the white woman. The presence of the asexual black woman, typically rendered elsewhere in terms of her sexuality, only serves to heighten the outrage of Manet's statement about the white female image – but it can do that because the black:white moral and racial antinomies are in place.

Or take the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977–83), whose unself-conscious antinomies of white/good versus black/evil have been discussed by Clyde Taylor. The basic confrontation is between Luke Skywalker (played by blond Mark Hamill), whose name identifies him as 'a WASP of ancient, biblical lineage' (Taylor 1988: 101), and Darth Vader, whose name may suggest 'dark invader' (ibid.: 100) and who is clad from head to toe in shiny black armour (as discussed in Chapter 3, the shininess may be as racially significant as the colour). The 'symbolic pawn' in this battle is Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), an image of 'divinely inspiring, pure white Victorian womanhood' (ibid.). Yet, as Taylor shows, this opposition is complicated, and perhaps thereby partially obscured, by other factors. Luke Skywalker's name also has 'a hint of Native American blood legitimacy' (ibid.: 101) and Darth Vader turns out to be his father, which Taylor relates to such white narratives as the fall from grace and the fear of the enemy within, communism (a potential meaning not lost on Ronald Reagan, who, as Taylor reminds us, took from *Star Wars* the term 'the evil empire' to describe the Soviet Union), and which we might also relate to white fears about the darkness within. Similarly, the casting of the African-American actor Billy Dee Williams as one of the good guys in the second and third parts of the trilogy not only bears witness to how widely perceived 'the first film's iconography and . . . all-white demographics' were among African-Americans (a disproportionately large sector of the US box office), but

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also relates to the way the various worlds involved are realised in images drawn from the stereotyping of the Third World. In this context, the casting of Williams 'fits a pattern current in Hollywood movies of those years – separating North American blacks from the demonology that would be directed to Third World people depicted as terrorists' (ibid.: 102–3). In such ways, the reductive dualism of black:white as hue, skin and symbol figures as both a remarkably flexible ground on which to play variations and yet also the bottom line on colour.

The earliest example given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the word 'white' being used to refer to a race of people was in 1604,¹⁶ and both Jordan (1977: 95) and Bernal (1987: 201) locate the emergence of the term in the American colonies. Yet grafting morality through hue on to the skin of the person was already in place in painting and literature by then, even where no developed notion of race was explicitly in play. It is in the Christian tradition.

The history of Western painting discloses a shift in flesh colourisation in painting between the medieval and Renaissance periods.¹⁷ In the medieval period there seems to be no interest in flesh differentiation; everyone looks pinky-yellow. Yet as one moves into the Renaissance, different skin colours begin to be registered. The most obvious is that of the black Magi Balthasar, one of the three wise men who visited Christ in the manger. This visit is only recorded in a few verses of Matthew's gospel, where there is no reference to complexion. The notion that one of the Magi, Balthasar, was black (usually understood to be a Moor) only developed in the Middle Ages, where the three men were taken to represent the three then known continents (Balthasar thus representing Africa). The registering of this in the dark skin of one of the Magi occurs, according to Gertrud Schiller's exhaustive study, only 'sporadically from the twelfth century onwards' but 'frequently in the fifteenth' (especially in North European art) (1971: 96, 112), to become routinised thereafter. Boime (1990: 9) suggests that Balthasar's presence, in an age of developing European exploration and expansion, represents 'a wish fantasy':

Instead of missionaries and slavers invading the black man's lands and plundering its wealth and subjugating its people by force, a noble and 'wise' black ruler comes of his own volition to the white man's land and lays down his wealth and his power at the feet of the Christ child.

He goes on to note (as does Bastide (1967)) that, even so, Balthasar is generally placed behind the other two kings or further away from the holy infant.

Marking of otherness by skin colour is also present in the depiction of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Increasingly, they are rendered as paler, whiter, than everyone else. This is most evident in the two set-pieces of Christian art,

the nativity and the crucifixion. In the former, Christ and Mary are so white that they give off light which illuminates the darker coloured faces of the shepherds, Magi and even Joseph, none of whom have the transcendent whiteness of Christ and Mary. In crucifixion paintings Christ's body may also give off light, but it may also be less glowingly, more cadaverously white. All those around, except Mary, are darker, though not necessarily uniformly.

A most striking example of flesh colouring is a study of *Madonna and Child with John the Baptist and St. Elizabeth* (c.1490–5) by Giovanni Bellini (colour Plate 5), in which Christ and Mary are almost purely white while John and Elizabeth (his mother) are much darker. John is especially dark and his black hair falls in ringlets (whereas Christ's and Mary's hair is straight and fair). Historically speaking, all these people are Jews, but Christ and Mary are enlightened, saved Jews, that is, Christians, whereas John and Elizabeth, key witnesses to the coming of Christianity, are none the less pre-Christian, perhaps even unsaved. While this may be an anachronistic perception, the difference between John/Elizabeth and Christ/Mary resembles that between Sephardic Jews (Arab in appearance) and Gentiles (white ones, that is).

The immediate explanation of such skin-symbol colour consciousness is not only European expansionism, but specifically the Crusades (cf. Miles 1989: 13, 17ff). The beginnings of wide and increasing travel beyond Europe involved an encounter with peoples darker in appearance than Europeans, especially North Europeans (who were the first to develop the image of a black Balthasar in painting). Such darkness, in any case not always so distinct from Southern European complexions, did not need to be registered, perhaps at all, and certainly not in terms of a difference at once moral and 'racial'. This is what the Crusades accomplished. Whatever the real motives for them, the primary terms in which the Crusades were and have subsequently been understood is as a struggle of Christianity against the non-Christian (and specifically against the Islamic powers in possession of the Holy Land). The struggle was thus not for possession or expansion but for transcendent, spiritual purposes. Even this does not of itself account for the colourisation of the struggle, but Christianity brought a tradition of black:white moral dualism to bear on an enemy that could itself be perceived as black. The Crusades were thus part of a heightening awareness of skin colour difference which they further inflected in terms of moral attributes.

This explanation can be supplemented by another, which I derive from the argument put forward by Leo Steinberg in his study of the representation of Christ's sexuality in Renaissance art (1983). Steinberg argues that from around the beginning of the thirteenth century, there was an increased 'humanation' in the representation of Christ, an increased emphasis upon his having been human as well as divine, with the result that imagery becomes specific about his human attributes. As he was human, he must, for instance, have been of one sex or the other and must correspondingly have

had the appropriate genitals. Steinberg argues that in this period, contrary to subsequent received perception, painting did depict Christ's genitals, indeed displayed them as a sign of his complete humanity. Following Steinberg, if Christ's humanity was to be fully depicted, then not only must the difference of his sex be represented but so also, in an age of increasing 'racial' awareness, must the difference of his skin colour.

Steinberg also notes a paradox: the Circumcision became increasingly popular as a subject for painting in the Renaissance and yet Christ is never shown to have a circumcised penis – the event is shown but not its bodily effect. Steinberg explains this as a contradiction between a readiness to depict the Circumcision because of its theological importance and a desire not to show Christ as in any way imperfect, that is, unwhole. However, may it not also be because to show him circumcised would have been to show him Jewish (and, indeed, in this particular like the other infidel, Muslim)? Christ's human perfection, in the rendering of his genitals as also of his skin colour, was ineluctably gentile and white.

The gentilising and whitening of Christ was achieved by the end of the Renaissance and by the nineteenth century the image of him as not just fair-skinned but blond and blue-eyed was fully in place. Bastide discusses the significance of the whole socially white ensemble:

His hair and his beard were given the colour of sunshine, the brightness of the light above, while his eyes retained the colour of the sky from which he descended and to which he returned.

(1967: 315)

The most successful painter of Christ in the twentieth century, the US American Warner E. Sallman, whose *Head of Christ* has been reproduced more than 500 million times, consistently depicted Christ with flowing, wavy, fair hair and a light complexion (and with the backlighting discussed below in Chapter 3) (Grimes 1994). Such popular imagery is still readily obtainable in Christian shops (colour Plate 6 and Plate 2.13).

Christ's whiteness is also that, in painting, of martyrs and beautiful young men.¹⁸ The Virgin Mary's whiteness is that of all truly feminine – womanly, motherly, ladylike – white women. Such hue and skin whitening of the appearance of the indubitable exemplars of white as moral symbol constitutes a slippage that also encapsulates the alluring, culturally intrinsic instabilities of white hue and flesh. Christ and Mary are both human and holy, present and non-existent, which is to say, hue white and uncoloured, skin white and universal.

Hue, skin and symbol bear three senses of whiteness as colour. The high moral value attached to white as symbol permits a slippage associating white hue and skin with such value. However, though I am going to explore this



Plate 2.13 Anonymous *Christ with Sleeping Soldiers* (n.d.; postcard bought at Genoa Cathedral, 1996)

further in the next section, it is the least of the work colour designation does in securing and maintaining white power. The wide application of white as symbol, in non-racially specific contexts, makes it appear neutral: white as good is a universal abstraction, it just happens that it coincides with people whose skin is deemed white. The uncertainties of whiteness as a hue, a colour and yet not a colour, make it possible to see the bearers of white skin as non-specific, ordinary and mere, and, it just so happens, the only people whose colour permits this perception. The fuzzy edges and minute gradations of skin whiteness itself make it a richly rewarded social category into which you might be admitted or up which you might climb. To name and to sense white people as white (especially in contradistinction to racially or geographically based terms, such as Negro or Indian) has proved a breathtakingly effective means of maintaining our non-particular, particular power.

White as explicit ideal

Though the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority. It is evidently the case that white people are not invariably represented as good and beautiful – therein lies our diversity, our all-encompassing particularity; yet the moral and aesthetic resonance of whiteness can and often has been mobilised in relation to white-skinned people. It is this that I want to explore here, arguing that the particular way in which this superiority is conceived and expressed, with its emphasis on purity, cleanliness, virginity, in short, absence, inflects whiteness once again towards non-particularity, only this time in the sense of non-existence.

The superiority of whiteness has been felt in terms of beauty as well as morality. Goethe's *Farbenlehre* provides a link between the perception of white as non-particular and as beautiful, since for him white people are beautiful precisely because their colouring is the least particular. Goethe asks himself whether all human 'forms and hues are not equally beautiful', acknowledging that it may be just local prejudice that prefers one over another. Yet he continues:

We venture, however . . . to assert that the white man, that is, he whose surface varies from white to reddish, yellowish, brownish, in short, whose surface appears most neutral in hue and least inclines to any particular and positive colour, is the most beautiful.

(1840: 265.)

Implicit in this is the sense that white people's whiteness enables them to inhabit without visual contradiction the highest point in the Enlightenment's

understanding of human development, that of the subject without properties; the beauty of their skin, just because it is nothing 'particular and positive', is the beauty of this intellectual ideal.

Even without this philosophical gloss, white people have long considered themselves the most beautiful of people, especially white women. The gallant term for women in general, 'the fair sex', has a distinct skin colour suggestion. Marina Warner (1994: 363ff.) details the ways in which blondness and beauty are synonymous in Western myth and fairy-tale. Significantly, the one exception to this is Snow White, who is dark-haired, but then she has the name and complexion to make up for it. Winthrop Jordan (1977: 8) instances the identification of whiteness with beauty in sixteenth-century England, especially in connection with Queen Elizabeth. Charles White's influential treatise on race in 1799, crossing phrenology with the idea of the Great Chain of Being, averred:

Ascending the line of gradation, we come at the last to the white European; who being most removed from the brute creation, may, on that account, be considered the most beautiful of the human race. . . . Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head . . . those rosy cheeks and coral lips? Where that erect posture and noble gait? In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? Where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion? Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermilion?

(quoted in Jordan 1977: 501–2)

Nineteenth-century racist thought repeatedly intertwined science and aesthetics, defining Aryans or Caucasians as the pinnacle of the human race in every respect, and therefore including beauty (cf. Mosse 1978, Poliakov 1974).

The notion of lighter or paler skin being more beautiful has also often applied to non-white people. When the narrator of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) first meets Umbopa, the Zulu who is to lead him to the treasure, he praises his appearance thus: 'I never saw a finer native. Standing about six feet three high, he was broad in proportion, and very shapely. In that light, too, his skin looked scarcely more than dark.' (1958: 42). bell hooks notes that even in 'the black community the fair-skinned black woman who most nearly resembled white women was seen as the "lady" and placed on a pedestal while darker-skinned black women were seen as bitches and whores' (1982: 110). Until recently, major African-American women stars have all been pale: Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll,

WHITE

Richard Dyer



London and New York