

## The matter of whiteness

Racial<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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 retailed 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.<sup>6</sup> 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)<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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),<sup>10</sup> 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 Europe<sup>11</sup> 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 Saïd (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, Saïd *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 or 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,<sup>12</sup> 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 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 (incapacities 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 halfcentury, 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 thousand. These in turn provide the basis for Christianity as a lived religion. The Christian calendar is organised to echo the narrative structure of the gospel, peaking at Christmas and Easter but with other incidents registered throughout the year. The ritual sacraments of Christianity take place on the believer's body, most re-enacting, albeit gesturally, the story of Christ's body: baptism (water on the body), confirmation (laying on of hands), communion (ingesting wine and wafers), penance (scourging the body), extreme unction (oil on the body), holy orders (laying on of hands) and marriage (rings on fingers).

Christianity is then very concrete, physical and body-minded. The particularity of this is evident if one compares it to the two other major world monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam (with both of which, despite historic and often brutal antagonisms, it has much in common). Neither of these has a comparable iconography and sacramental system of the body and, most strikingly, Islam expressly forbids representation of the Prophet. Christianity by contrast is obsessed with Christ's body. Yet, rightly, we think of Christianity as an anti-body religion.

For all the emphasis on the body in Christianity, the point is the spirit that is 'in' the body. What has made Christianity compelling and fascinating is precisely the mystery that it posits, that somehow there is in the body something that is not of the body which may be variously termed spirit, mind, soul or God. This is the distinctive inflection that Christianity gives to Western dualistic philosophy (Hodge 1975). It also underlies many of the grand narratives of European Christianity: the Apostolic Succession (that is, the notion of an unbroken chain of laying on of hands in ordination to the priesthood that constitutes, typically in a bodily act, the passing on of the spirit that came upon the apostles after Christ's death), the Divine Right of Kings (the doctrine that kings ruled by virtue of a direct relation to God, a doctrine itself contesting, from within the secular realm, the Papacy's similar claim), and the Lutheran emphasis on each individual's personal relationship to God and on individual conscience, the voice of God within, as a guide to behaviour (discussed in relation to whiteness by Kovel (1988: 124–5)). while the Enlightenment's largely atheistic shift away from God to Man as the centre of human endeavour and consciousness felt like a drastic break with Christianity, it was in many ways a continuation of the same way of thinking and feeling, simply breaking with the sense of the divinity, but not the presence, of the spirit within.

Christianity maintains a conception of a split between mind and body, regarding the latter as at the least inferior and often as evil. Yet it reproduces such dualistic thought only, magically, incomprehensibly, to transcend it in the spirit-in-the-body of Mary and Christ.

The gender ideals promoted by these two figures derive from the different relations of their bodies to the spirit. Mary is a vessel for the spirit; she does nothing and indeed has no carnal knowledge, but is filled with God; her purity (of which her virginity is only one aspect) is a given of her nature, not something achieved. Christ on the other hand is God, or rather he is simultaneously, again incomprehensibly, fully divine and fully human. The signs of his humanity are his appetites, his temptations and his suffering. Both Mary and Christ provide models of behaviour and being to which humans may aspire. In women these are of passivity, expectancy, receptivity, a kind of sacred readiness,<sup>14</sup> motherhood as the supreme fulfilment of one's nature, all of this constituting a given purity and state of grace (and, where these are absent, the memory of the other, pre-Christian female archetype, Eve); in men the model is of a divided nature and internal struggle between mind (God) and body (man), and of suffering as the supreme expression of both spiritual and physical striving.

Mary and Christ are ambiguous models. They are both exemplary and exceptional human beings. It would be presumptuous – and lacking in Christian humility and hence the very virtuousness after which one strove – to identify with Christ or Mary. They are what one should aspire to be like and yet also what one can never be. This sets up a dynamic of aspiration, of striving to be, to transcend, and to go on striving in the face of the impossibility of transcendence. Such striving (which in women must also be passive) is registered in suffering, self-denial and self-control, and also material achievement, if it can be construed as the temporary and partial triumph of the mind over matter. These constitute something of a thumbnail sketch of the white ideal.

I am not arguing that Christianity is of its essence white. Given that Christianity developed initially within Judaism, that one of its foundational thinkers was the North African Augustine, and that it is now most alive

in Africa, South America and the black churches of Europe and North America, it is by no means clear that whiteness is constitutive of it. Yet not only did Christianity become the religion, and religious export, of Europe, indelibly marking its culture and consciousness, it has also been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history, seen in relation to, for instance, the following: the persistence of the Manichean<sup>15</sup> dualism of black:white that could be mapped on to skin colour difference; the role of the Crusades in racialising the idea of Christendom (making national/geographic others into enemies of Christ); the gentilising and whitening of the image of Christ and the Virgin in painting; the ready appeal to the God of Christianity in the prosecution of doctrines of racial superiority and imperialism.

Throughout this book I give all this its due in examining the representation of whiteness, yet what I want to underline here is not so much these contingent and reversible aspects of Christianity but the underlying motif of embodiment. To be able to think at all of bodies containing different spiritual qualities, or of some having such qualities and others not having them (a trope of white racism), of bodies containing that which controls them and then extends beyond them to the control of others and the environment (a trope of enterprise and imperialism), all this requires the first conceptual leap represented by the bodies of Christ and Mary, the sacraments, observances and theologies that rework them and the distinctive European culture founded upon all of this.

### Embodiment: race

Before the middle of this century, few white people seem to have hesitated to call themselves white and to speak of belonging to the white race. This leaps out at one now, since in our time it is only extreme right and racist discourse that has an acknowledged and clear concept of a white race. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers and politicians, however, have no compunction about detailing the innate quality of white people. A fiercely anti-racist text like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is no less full of statements about the nature (far from wholly admirable) of the white race than is a colonialist adventure tale celebrating white prowess, such as *King Solomon's Mines* (1886) or *She* (1887). Even in the Tarzan films, touched on in [Chapter 4](#), not only does Tarzan's body display the evidence of his racial superiority, but, until the 1950s, characters explicitly talk about it. Now, however, to talk about race is to talk about all races except the white.

Yet the ways in which white people were once racially talked about still inform the ways we are now imagined, not least because the cultural production of the past few centuries still provides much of the image vocabulary of the present. Within that legacy, there is, sometimes more strongly, sometimes less, a notion that white people have a peculiar relationship to race, of not being quite contained by their racial categorisation. It is the ideas of whites as a race and the ways in which race is conceptually different in their case that I want to explore in this section.

Even before we arrive at concepts of race *per se* we need to note the first intellectual moves that had to be made, and upon which it is founded. The first has already been described: the perception of a link between the body and spirit as revealed in Christian culture. The second is produced in the characteristic development of Europe<sup>16</sup> up to, say, the sixteenth century, a history of rulers simultaneously identifying terrain over which centralised control can be maintained (to do with geographical givens and the stage of development of military, political and bureaucratic organisation), dominating it and putting boundaries around it. In this process, populations come to be identified as those within and those without the boundaries, populations that it can then seem logical to represent in terms of bodily and/or temperamental characteristics. It is with the incursion of the European nations into territories outside Europe, whose populations are more markedly physically different, that the conflation of body and temperament – a full concept of race – comes into being, but the idea of populations apparently defined by intrinsic difference was already in place before this.

Elaborated concepts of race began to be developed in the eighteenth century and to take hold in the nineteenth. These were made up of developments in science as well as deeper rooted ideas of embodiment, of populations and (as is explored in [Chapter 2](#)) of skin colour itself. They flourished by virtue of their political effectivity, a point developed in the US context by recent historical studies by Theodore Allen, David Roediger and Alexander Saxton.

Allen *et al.* argue that a sense of being white, of belonging to a white race, only widely developed in the

USA in the nineteenth century as part of the process of establishing US identity. The appeal to a common whiteness addressed European settlers, on the one hand over and against the indigenous reds and the imported blacks, and on the other over and above the particularities of the different European nations from which they had come. You might be British, you might even be Irish, Polish or Greek, but you were also white, not red or black. Equivalent histories of white consciousness in European countries have not been undertaken (as opposed to the histories of race ideas that I draw on later), but need to be. They may help to explain patterns of popular investment in imperialism, the effective jingoism of the appeal to working-class sacrifice in the First World War, for instance, or the Scottish involvement in British imperialism, noted by Tom Nairn (1968: 13) as a way of asserting a common white British identity without having to become English, a motif of national-regional inclusion within an imperial project that may well be identified in many other countries.

Whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people. It has generally been much more successful than class in uniting people across national cultural differences and against their best interests. This has been strengthened by two instabilities that such a coalition produces. On the one hand, it creates a category of maybe, sometime whites, peoples who may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances. The Irish, Mexicans, Jews and people of mixed race provide striking instances: often excluded, sometimes indeed being assimilated into the category of whiteness, and at others treated as a 'buffer' (Allen 1994: 14)<sup>17</sup> between the white and the black or indigenous. On the other hand, whiteness as a coalition also incites the notion that some whites are whiter than others, with the Anglo-Saxons, Germans and Scan-dinavians usually providing the apex of whiteness under British imperialism, US development and Nazism. As both these aspects of whiteness – where it begins and ends, notions of degrees of whiteness – are especially articulated in relation to notions of colour I will leave further discussion of them to [Chapter 2](#). Here I want to note their social and political effectivity. A shifting border and internal hierarchies of whiteness suggest that the category of whiteness is unclear and unstable, yet this has proved its strength. Because whiteness carries such rewards and privileges, the sense of a border that might be crossed and a hierarchy that might be climbed has produced a dynamic that has enthralled people who have had any chance of participating in it.

I turn now to the concepts of race and the white race that developed in the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century, that shored up the sense of a category worth getting into if you could.

All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of hetero-sexuality. Race is a means of categorising different types of human body which reproduce themselves. It seeks to systematise differences and to relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences. I look first at race as a means of categorisation and then at the consequences of its being realised through heterosexuality.

We may distinguish between two broad ways of categorising race: one genealogical, concerned with origins and lineages of reproduction, the other more statically biological, concerned with identifying and securing difference on and/or in the body itself.<sup>18</sup> I shall consider them in this order, chiefly because the biological seems to have eclipsed the genealogical in recent times. I am not, however, suggesting that the genealogical comes before the biological, broadly conceived – indeed, the simple identification of bodily differences between populations almost certainly predates constructing different lineages for them.

Whites figure in both the genealogical and biological traditions, though more uncomfortably in the latter. This is partly because to have a history is one splendid thing; to be defined by one's body is quite another – the former accords with the white concept of self, but the latter is uneasy with it. It has also to do with the nature of the intellectual operations involved. The archaeological and historical work of genealogy was bound up with Europeans' quest for forbears: white people saw themselves in what they were investigating. Biology, on the other hand, has traditionally been based upon a model of scientific knowledge as separate from that which it investigates. It is thus not surprising that the biology of race should sometimes seem to have written whites out of the account, for whites are those who have such knowledge, but are themselves less readily the object of it.

Racial genealogy tells histories of populations, generally winding up in the mists of time, to show how environment and tradition have moulded the appearance and character of the people in question. White

genealogy has focused on the Aryans or Caucasians. The former are posited as the ancient inhabitants of what is now North West India and Pakistan. The term, which came to prominence in the early nineteenth century, is taken from a Sanskrit word meaning 'of noble birth', and the Indian ancestors of the Aryans (when acknowledged at all) were identified as the Brahmins, the highest caste in Indian society. It was posited that the Aryans had emigrated to the West and been the founding people of Europe. The Caucasian (a term coined by the natural historian J. F. Blumenbach in 1795) was a variant of this theory, since it was through and from the Caucasus mountains that the Aryans came to Europe. The Caucasian variant both stressed the Caucasus mountains themselves as a determinant factor on white racial formation and enabled the Aryan myth to be severed, most notably at the hands of Nazism, from its Asian associations.

The Aryan/Caucasian myth established a link between Europeans and a venerable culture known to pre-date Europe's oldest civilisation, ancient Greece. It is Martin Bernal's thesis that the myth's function was to provide a white (that is, European-like) origin for ancient Greek society. Before the early nineteenth century, it was widely accepted that Greece had been conquered by the Egyptians and Phoenicians, from whom the characteristics of ancient Greek culture derived. However, argues Bernal, in an age of imperialism, such an idea was intolerable. Greece was seen as the cradle of Europe, but something had given birth to Greece, and that had to be compatible with the European sense of self and could not therefore be located in Africa.

The Aryan and the Caucasian model share a notion of origins in mountains. Bernal notes the admiration of the Romantics, by whom such notions were especially promulgated, for 'small, virtuous and "pure" communities in remote and cold places: Switzerland, North Germany and Scotland' (1987: 209). Such places had a number of virtues: the clarity and cleanliness of the air, the vigour demanded by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate., the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of mountain vistas, even the greater nearness to God above and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow. All these virtues could be seen to have formed the white character, its energy, enterprise, discipline and spiritual elevation, and even the white body, its hardness and tautness (born of the battle with the elements, and often unfavourably compared with the slack bodies of non-whites),<sup>19</sup> its uprightness (aspiring to the heights), its affinity with (snowy) whiteness. Such notions did not apply only to forbears. They can still be found in, for instance, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century notions of Canadian identity, where the experience of the cold North is claimed to have moulded in the white settler people a distinct white national character (cf. Berger 1966), and in the German *Bergfilm* (mountain film) of the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Rentschler 1990), in which white men and women pitted and found themselves exultantly against mountain heights and whiteness. Both cases are instructive: explicit racial reference was not always made and both were to do with progress and modernity not genealogy, not looking back to a mountain origin, yet both mobilised a similar rhetoric and imagery of the cold to suggest the distinctiveness of a white identity.

The quest for Aryan/Caucasian roots was not always in the first instance about the white race. There are two separable projects, both having to do with ideas of racial purity. One is indeed to locate and define the white race and its origins. In this context, the white race was one pure race among other pure races, indubitably superior in character but not in degree of racial purity. Linnaeus, perhaps the first to categorise the races of humankind (in his *Systema naturae* (1735)), did not consider the inferior *Americanus rubescens*, *Asiaticus luridus* or *Afer niger* less racially pure than the superior *Europaeus albus* (Poliakov 1974: 160–1). However, genealogical research was also at other points motivated by the search for the origins of humankind *tout court*. In this perspective, white people represent the only sub-race that has remained pure to the human race's Aryan forbears (and has even perhaps purified that inheritance via the Caucasus). Non-whites then become seen as degenerative, falling away from the true nature of the (human) race. This notion goes back at least to Johan Boemus, who in 1521 proposed that all humans were descended from Ham, Shem and Japeth, the sons of Noah, but those who descended from Ham degenerated into blackness, whereas the civilised, who remained white, were descended from Shem and Japeth (Fredrickson 1981: 10); more 'scientific' and Aryan variants were proposed in the eighteenth century (Poliakov 1974: 163ff.).

In the quest for purity, whites win either way: either they are a distinct, pure race, superior to all others, or else they are the purest expression of the human race itself. What is interesting in either version is the emphasis on purity, and of the special purity of whiteness, for (as is discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) this is a theme

central to what is implied and mobilised by this group being called 'white'.

We may also note here the affinity of the genealogical with another model of the place of humans (and specifically white ones) in the scheme of things, one with considerable currency in the eighteenth century, that of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy 1936). This proposed that all of creation was connected in a hierarchy that proceeded from the lowest to the highest, the latter being God. Black people were placed only just above apes (a notion taken over into corruptions of Darwinism and often surviving in the quest for the 'missing link' between humans and apes). White men (sic) were placed at the highest point of earthly creation, linked via the angels to God. This was not an historical notion, it was an essentially static model of the order of things, but it does echo the genealogical sense of the higher and purer nature of white humankind. The idea of the closeness of white men to angels is especially suggestive in relation to the representation of white people in terms of light, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

The Aryan model was argued principally on the basis of linguistics (the similarities of (some) Indian and European languages); the Caucasian model, however, drew upon natural science. Linnaeus extrapolated from his work on the classification of species to make his racial distinctions; Blumenbach based his distinctions on comparisons of skull shape and size. From this flowed the mania for measurable biological distinctions in so much subsequent racial thought, from phrenology, craniology and anthropometry to genetics.<sup>20</sup> What seems remarkable here (although a new look at the source material might contradict this) is the apparent lack of interest in the biology of the white race. The many different studies of the racial differences in skulls, facial features, body shape and posture, genitals, blood and eventually genes do include whites, but more as a norm not itself in need of investigation.

It is hard not to see biological race research as an arm of imperialism and domestic control, whose aim is to know, fix and place the non-white rather than, as the genealogical approach does, to establish the characteristics of whiteness. From the point of view of the present study, the significance of biological approaches to race is precisely their disinterest in, and even perhaps unwillingness to consider, the racial character of white people, for that would be to understand white people as, like non-whites, no more than their bodies. Thus while biological approaches to race do seek to pin down the racial characteristics of white people too, a countervailing discourse has stressed that which cannot be scrutinised, that little something more that makes whites different.

A clear expression of this can be found in the work of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose *Die Grundlagen des XIX Jahrhunderts (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century)* of 1899 expounded on the nature of the German people as the Aryan race. As George Mosse observes, Chamberlain did believe in blood, cranial measurement and anthropological methods, but 'as not all Germans possessed the outward appearance proper to Aryans, it seemed best to retreat to the race-soul which they did share' (1978: 105–6). Intangibilities of character, energy and high (sic) mindedness come to constitute the white race-soul and distinguish white people from all others. As the Brazilian literary critic Alcides Bezerra put it in 1919, the 'Aryan race' is the 'lord and master of the world by virtue of its enviable spiritual qualities' (quoted in Skidmore 1974: 63).

It is not the case that non-white peoples were always assumed not to have souls. Indeed, many whites – most notably Harriet Beecher Stowe – have considered that blacks were more spiritual and had, as later generations would say, more soul. It is not spirituality or soul that is held to distinguish whites, but what we might call 'spirit': get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement. Above all, the white spirit could both master and transcend the white body, while the non-white soul was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body. A hard, lean body, a dieted or trained one, an upright,<sup>21</sup> shoulders back, unrelaxed posture, tight rather than loose movement, tidiness in domestic arrangement and eating manners, privacy in relation to bowels, abstinence or at any rate planning in relation to appetites, all of these are the ways the white body and its handling display the fact of the spirit within. But that spirit itself cannot be seen.

Genetics has likewise often been used to prove, albeit by final reference to an attribute of the body, that white people are more intelligent than black (the inconvenient finding that yellow people are even more intelligent than white tends not to make the headlines or else to be dismissed in terms of an unnerving, wily, in some sense unnatural hyper-intelligence). Genetics has also sometimes granted a bodily superiority to

non-white people, for instance, attributing black sports prowess to superior musculature, powers of endurance and inborn fleetness of foot. What genetics also does is to locate race in parts of the body that cannot be seen. Ideas of racial blood had already done this, for while blood, unlike genes, is itself immediately visible, few maintained that the naked eye could see the difference between types of racial blood.<sup>22</sup> The concept of racial blood came to dominate definitions of race by the end of the nineteenth century in the USA, just as genetics has in the twentieth. 'Blood' and genes have been said to carry more of the purely mental properties that constitute white superiority. In these discourses, all blood and genes carry mental properties, but, invisibly, white blood and genes carry more intelligence, more spirit of enterprise, more moral refinement. Thus our bodily blood or genes give us that extra-bodily edge.

Biological concepts of race appear more stable and grounded than genealogical ones, especially in a scientific age, yet they actually created problems for the representation of white people. On the one hand, they reinforced the notion of the inescapable corporeality of non-white peoples, while leaving the corporeality of whites less certain, something that fed into the function of non-white, and especially black, people in representation of being a kind of definite thereness by means of which white people can gain a grounding in materiality and 'know who they are' (a point touched on elsewhere). At the level of representation, whites remain, for all their transcending superiority, dependent on non-whites for their sense of self, just as they are materially in so many imperial and post-imperial, physical and domestic labour circumstances. Such dependency could form the basis of a bond, but has more often been a source of anxiety. On the other hand, the emphasis on whites being distinguished by that which cannot be seen, whether spirit or merely genetically conceptualised intelligence, means that it is complicated to represent white people visually. In a culture that at the same time places a great weight on the visible, this is a liability. This problem runs through my considerations of white representation in [chapters 2 and 3](#).

Concepts of race are concepts of different kinds of bodies. What makes whites different, and at times uneasily locatable in terms of race, is their embodiment, their closeness to the pure spirit that was made flesh in Jesus, their spirit of mastery over their and other bodies, in short their potential to transcend their raced bodies. There is, however, before we turn to embodiment in relation to imperialism, a further dimension to whiteness and race, one implicit in the concepts of race just discussed and in the oddness of whites in relation to them. This is heterosexuality.

If race is always about bodies, it is also always about the reproduction of those bodies through heterosexuality. This is implicit in notions of genealogy (the chain of sexual reproduction leading back to the origins of the race), degeneration (the bad chain of such reproduction) and genetics (the way we now understand the passing on of characteristics through reproduction), something the 'gene' root of all these terms indicates. It can be made surprisingly explicit, as in a campaign against venereal disease by the American Social Hygiene Association in 1922, which sought, as John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman put it, 'to channel sexuality into marriage and reproduction', with separate posters for blacks and whites, promoting sex as something both inspiring and racial: 'To both boy and girl, sex gives a new joy in living, a desire for a career, a longing to do great things for the race'.<sup>23</sup> Though race here could refer to the human race, accompanying pictures and the readiness in the period to talk of one's particular race as 'the race' suggest otherwise. The centrality of reproduction to heterosexuality can also be sensed in the extraordinary anxiety surrounding inter-racial sexuality, something explicit to the point of psychosis in earlier texts but still betrayed by the fact that a film like *Jungle Fever* (1991) can be regarded as controversial and one like *The Bodyguard* (1992) as daring. Neither of these films is 'about' sexual reproduction, and the fact of reproduction does not necessarily, nor perhaps even usually, enter directly into the representation of inter-racial sexuality, yet it is what is at stake in it. Inter-racial hetero-sexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body. For all the appeal to spirit, still, if white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the 'natural' basis of their dominion is no longer credible.

If races are conceptualised as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity. Given the actual history of inter-breeding in the imperial history of the past few centuries, it is not surprising that various means have been found to deal with this threat to whiteness. In the US South, elaborate tabulations of degrees of blackness (mulatto,

quadroon, octoroon) were developed, while in many states the 'one-drop' definition was promulgated, suggesting that even as much as one drop of black blood was enough to make a person black.<sup>24</sup> These measures focused on blackness as a means of limiting access to the white category, which only the utterly white could inhabit. In Brazil, in contrast, miscegenation was until quite recently positively encouraged on the grounds that the population would gradually become whiter and the black and native elements would be bred out (Skidmore 1974). Both approaches make the same assumptions: that it is better to be white and that sexual reproduction is the key to achieving whiteness.

The recurrent motif of rape in white race fiction makes sense in this perspective. The form that rape takes in these fictions, of white women by non-white men, not only displaces attention from the routinised misuse of non-white women by white men. It also threatens white men's control over their property, in two senses: their women as their chattels, and their control over their wives as the means of ensuring their other possessions are passed on to those who should properly inherit them (sons, or if need be daughters, whom they can be sure are their own offspring).

Rape is by definition horrific. As Jenny Sharpe (1993) points out (in the context of Raj fictions), it has not always characterised colonial fiction and when it does appear can be seen as an expressive response to threats to colonial authority. She notes its emergence in India only after the 1857 rebellion and we may similarly observe its importance in post-civil war fiction in the USA. Rape can then be seen as a way of registering, and demonising rather than heeding, the threat of non-white resistance and empowerment. However, rape is not just any motif, nor is it important just because it strikes at the heart of white reproduction in the sense already suggested. It also, in the way it is imagined, exposes and threatens white heterosexuality itself.

Inter-racial (non-white on white) rape is represented as bestiality storming the citadel of civilisation – but this often implies that sexuality itself is bestial and antithetical to civilisation, itself achieved and embodied by whites. What is disclosed by this is the conundrum of sexuality for whites, the difficulty they have over the very mechanism that ensures their racial survival and purity, heterosexual reproduction. To ensure the survival of the race, they have to have sex – but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white. This is the logic behind the commonly found anxiety that the white race will fade away. It may be presented as just a matter of numbers. Benjamin Franklin was already worrying in his *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751) that 'the number of purely White People in the World is proportionately very small' (quoted in Jordan 1977: 143) and Joseph Gobineau, writing in 1848, believed that the 'white species will disappear henceforth from the face of the earth' because of so many 'mixtures and... attenuations' of blood (quoted in Poliakov 1974: 237). The theme of outnumbering has been a mainstay of white racial politics, becoming the organising principle of British post-war debate, moving from discussion of 'overcrowding' (especially in relation to housing) to the language of 'flooding' and 'swamping' used respectively by Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher (Fryer 1984: 381ff.; Miles and Phizacklea 1984: 20ff.). These might be posed in terms of numbers migrating into Britain, but the notion of breeding was never far behind. Powell argued that it was not enough – as both Labour and Conservative administrations had – to limit numbers coming into the country, for 'the numbers of "coloured immigrates" continued to increase... because of the children born to these migrants in Britain' (ibid.: 66). Shoring up this perception are the stereotypes of non-white reproduction: the endlessly extended Asian family, the fatherless West Indian family living off welfare, the teeming Oriental hordes.

In the face of this, white discourse has often emphasised the importance of white reproduction and especially of white women's responsibility in its regard. Marilyn Frye notes this in *Ku Klux Klan* and other explicitly racist pronouncements: the anxiety over the threat to the extinction of the white race, the worry about the lowness of the white birth-rate (1983: 122–3). She goes on to note the subtle ways in which such thinking informs apparently less racially coded thought. Feminists have noted the role of compulsory heterosexuality in keeping women in their place, but have less often considered that 'the pressures of compulsory motherhood on white women are not just pressures to keep women down, but pressure to keep the white population up' (ibid.: 123).<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when white people start challenging lesbian feminism (and committedly childless people of any sexuality or sex) with the taunt that 'if we had our way, the species would die out', Frye suspects such remarks 'confuse the white race with the human species':

The demand that white women make white babies to keep the race afloat has not been overt, but I think it is



being made over and over again in disguised form as a preachment within an all-white context about our duty to keep the species afloat.

(ibid.: 124).

The problem is that whites may not be very good at it, and precisely because of the qualities of 'spirit' that make us white. Our minds control our bodies and therefore both our sexual impulses and our forward planning of children. The very thing that makes us white endangers the reproduction of our whiteness.

This problem of whiteness and sexuality is represented differently for men and women. In the West heterosexuality implies gendered sexualities, the idea that sex is different for men and women (often, it seems, incommensurably so). Gender difference underpins male:female power difference and is realised in and through heterosexuality. In turn, the relation of white men and white women to sexuality is of a piece with Christian iconography and other aspects of white gender roles.

White men are seen as divided, with more powerful sex drives but also a greater will power. The sexual dramas of white men have to do with not being able to resist the drives or with struggling to master them. The drives are typically characterised as dark. This forms part of the symbolic function of dark peoples in relation to white identity already touched on. As Sander Gilman (1985) among others suggests,<sup>26</sup> projection of sexuality on to dark races was a means for whites to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires. But there need not be explicit or even implied racial reference, it is enough that there is darkness. This furnishes the hetero-sexual desire that will rescue whites from sterility while separating such desire from what whiteness aspires to. Dark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against. Thus it is that the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of their giving way to darkness and the heroism of their channelling or resisting it.

The divided nature of white masculinity, which is expressed in relation not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterised as low, dark and irremediably corporeal, reproduces the structure of feeling of the Christ story. His agony is that he was fully flesh and fully spirit, able to be tempted though able to resist. In the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it. The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence in such pain.

The presence of the dark within the white man also enables him to assume the position as the universal signifier for humanity. He encompasses all the possibilities for human existence, the darkness and the light. The gradations of whiteness complicate this. Lower-class and Latin whites of both sexes may also have the darkness, but it is less certain that they have the will to struggle against it. The really white man's destiny is that he has further to fall (into darkness) but can aspire higher (towards the light). There is a further twist. *Not* to be sexually driven is liable to cast a question mark over a man's masculinity – the darkness is a sign of his true masculinity, just as his ability to control it is a sign of his whiteness – but there can be occasions when either side discredits the other, the white man's masculinity 'tainting' his whiteness or his whiteness emasculating him. These contradictions constitute the fertile ground for the production of stories and images of a white masculinity seen as exemplary of the human condition.

The potential for white men to 'fall' suggests the Bible story (and images of Adam in the West have, like those of Christ, long been unsemitic). One of the terms that, in Victorian times, most suggested an association of white women with sexuality was that of the 'fallen woman' (cf. Nead 1988). Yet the construction of white female sexuality is different from that of the male. The white man has – as the bearer of agony, as universal subject – to have the dark drives against which to struggle. The white woman on the other hand was not supposed to have such drives in the first place. She might discover that she did and this is the stuff of a great deal of Western narrative, but this was a fall from whiteness, not constitutive of it, as in the case of the white man's torment. The model for white women is the Virgin Mary, a pure vessel for reproduction who is unsullied by the dark drives that reproduction entails.

There are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women *vis-à-vis* sexuality. As the literal bearers of children, and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial raising, women are the indispensable means by which the group – the race – is in every sense reproduced. Women are also required

to display the signs, especially the finery, of the social group to which they are bonded in heterosexuality, be it class or race.

White women thus carry – or, in many narratives, betray – the hopes, achievements and character of the race. They guarantee its reproduction, even while not succeeding to its highest heights. Yet their very whiteness, their refinement, makes of sexuality a disturbance of their racial purity. It's no surprise that Frye should find Ku Klux Klan discourse the most explicit about the threat posed to the white race by the problems of its own reproduction, since the Klan invested so strongly in a mode of representation that etherealised white women to the point that to imagine them having sex and being delivered of children is scandalous and virtually sacrilegious. It is white women's duty but it is what white women are least able to do and still be white. Klan imagery only pushes to its crazed logical conclusion an instability long implicit in normative imagery of white women's sexuality.

White women's role in reproduction makes them at once privileged and subordinated in relation to the operation of white power in the world. As bearers of whiteness, it is fitting that they may exercise power over non-white people of both sexes. We see this most evidently in colonial texts, where, as Ella Shohat (1991: 63) has noted, white women

can be granted an ephemeral 'positional superiority'. In a film like *The Sheik* (1921), the 'norms of the text' ... are represented by the Western male but in the moments of His absence, the white woman becomes the civilising centre of the film.

It may also be evident in expressions of white female transgression, notably at the level of sexuality, bell hooks considers the case of Madonna, who has been much celebrated for her 'somebody's got to be in charge side', hooks suggests that, fun as it might be to see her giving the likes of Warren Beatty and Kevin Costner the run-around, this 'in charge' side is 'most expressed in her interaction with non-white folks, heterosexual and gay, and gay white folks' whom she 'publicly describes as "emotional cripples"'. Madonna, hooks observes, 'is not breaking with any white supremacist, patriarchal status quo; she is endorsing and perpetuating it' (1992: 163). Similarly, Kate Davy instances the still more deliberately transgressive example of the WOW Café, a women's theatre group whose performances often produced a 'bad girl' image of women, in revolt against both traditional respectability and radical feminist ideas. Davy suggests that such performances 'have been enormously productive, but at the same time as they challenge white womanhood, they depend on it and once again circumscribe and consign to erasure those [non-white] bodies white womanhood has nullified historically and continues to negate' (1995: 199). In these examples, whether acting as civilising centre, being in charge or in revolt against good (white) girls, white women are privileged and oppressive *vis-à-vis* non-white people.

However, white women do not have the same relation to power as white men. Shohat stresses their always temporary occupation of the position of power. Davy argues that the archetypal role of white women has been to foster individualism in white men while denying it to themselves, 'reproducing a construction of white womanhood that allows white women to signify and enact... whiteness ... without inhabiting the subject position reserved for the white men' (ibid.: 197). One result of this, in colonial texts centred on women such as *The Jewel in the Crown* (explored in [Chapter 5](#)), is that white women simultaneously stand for white power and yet are shown to be unable either to exercise it effectively or to change what they perceive to be its abuses.

Race and gender are ineluctably intertwined, through the primacy of heterosexuality in reproducing the former and defining the latter. It is a productively unstable alliance. The idea of race, discussed in the first part of this section, locates historical, social and cultural differences in the body. In principle this means all bodies, but in practice whites have accorded themselves a special relation to race and thus to their own and other bodies. They have more of that unquantifiable something, spirit, that puts them above race. This is a badge of superiority, yet it also creates an instability for whites at the hidden heart of the notion of race, namely heterosexual reproduction and its attendant sex roles. Whites must reproduce themselves, yet they must also control and transcend their bodies. Only by (impossibly) doing both can they be white. Thus are produced some of the great narrative dilemmas of whiteness, notably romance, adultery, rape and pornography.

## Embodiment: enterprise and imperialism

The ideal white man was one who knew how to use his head, who knew how to manage and control things and get things done. Those whites who were not in a position to perform these functions nevertheless aspired to them.

Eldridge Cleaver: *Soul on Ice* (1969: 80)

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe expresses very clearly and unembarrassedly what she takes to be the nature of white men: they are, a word she uses repeatedly, 'enterprising'. From this flows their daring (another favoured term) and steadfastness, their capacity to organise, their hardness and also their rapacity. Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 83) similarly evokes the 'dazzle, brilliance, the spirit of adventure in the entrepreneurial world, good use of good training' expected of upper-class white men over a century later. 'Enterprise' is an aspect of both spirit itself – energy, will, ambition, the ability to think and see things through – and of its effect – discovery, science, business, wealth creation, the building of nations, the organisation of labour (carried out by racially lesser humans). Stowe deplores its unrestrained exercise (and gives to women the task of such restraint), especially insofar as it fails to recognise the humanity, and rights, of those not so endowed, specifically 'negroes', yet she also admires its accomplishments and conveys the appeal of its dynamism and confidence.

Enterprise as an aspect of spirit is associated with the concept of will – the control of self and the control of others. John Hodge (1975) identifies this as a central value in Western culture, tracing it back to Plato. Will is literally mapped on to the world in terms of those who have it and those who don't, the ruler and the ruled, the coloniser and the colonised. Hodge and Struckmann trace such dualism from the Greeks through Manicheism, Augustine and up to Freud, the latter considering that 'the leadership of the human species' had fallen upon the 'great ruling powers among the white nations' ('Reflections upon War and Death' 1915; quoted in Hodge and Struckmann 1975: 182). The idea of leadership suggests both a narrative of human progress and the peculiar quality required to effect it. Thus white people lead humanity forward because of their temperamental qualities of leadership: will power, far-sightedness, energy. These were the very qualities that Lamarck had posited as characteristic of the white race (Poliakov 1974: 215).

The most important vehicle for the exercise and thus the display of this dynamism, this enterprise, is imperialism (of which, of course, the world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a part). This gave to enterprise an unprecedented horizon of expansion, of dangers to face, of material – goods, terrain, people – to organise. Edward Saïd (1993) has shown how profoundly imperialism structures Western literary culture, to the point that many canonical works with no apparent interest in imperialism none the less assume and depend on the existence of empire for the life style of the characters, the assumptions they make, for plot reversals and resolutions. The same is more widely true of the way space and time are imagined in white culture.

The history of colonialism as popularly imagined and promulgated could be conveyed in terms of the excitement of advance, of forward movement through time, and of the conquest and control of space. Robert Miles and Annie Phizackiea evoke this in their account of the history of British imperialism:

The very existence of Empire was viewed [as] the outcome of the struggle between superior and inferior 'races', an outcome in which the labour of the inferior 'races' had been appropriated not only to ensure 'their' advancement towards 'civilisation' but also, and especially, 'our' advancement to the position of *Great Britain*, workshop of the world.

(1984: 12–13)

A similar conflation of race, history and narrative time and space is suggested by Walter Benn Michaels in his summary of US colonialist ideas:

Anglo-Saxons ... were not only capable of self-government, as a 'race of empire-builders' [Albert J. Beveridge 1899<sup>27</sup>], they were biologically destined to govern others as well: 'The breed to which the Southern white man belongs,' wrote Thomas Dixon in *The Clansman*, 'has conquered every foot of soil on

this earth their feet have pressed for a thousand years’.

(1989:185)

The temporal, spatial and racial story of history is a product of the same template of enterprise and imperialism as the more evidently fictional, escapist and entertainment forms.

The Victorian adventure story is one major instance of the latter, but I want to take another which is very close to it, namely the Western. Though no longer the central genre of popular culture it once was, the Western (novels, shows, comics, advertising and television as well as films) was one of the most successful, influential and beloved imaginative constellations for the greater part of this century. Many of the best-known films and stars throughout the world have been Western; the genre has been widely imitated internationally (the novels of the German Karl May and the English J. T. Edson, Hindi, Australian and European, notably spaghetti, Western movies) and widely held to provide the basis for many other films (from the work of Akira Kurosawa to Vietnam movies and *Star Wars*); in dress (above all, jeans) and music (notably the growth of country music), the Western continues to leave its mark on the international imagination. Beyond this, it is also one of the founding myths of the USA,<sup>28</sup> a country which has (for about the same span as the Western itself) symbolised the direction, the hopes and fears of the world (only countervailed by the communist dream, whose national exemplar, the USSR, seldom seized the imagination as did the USA and the Western).

Though I shall discuss briefly in a moment what is more commonly taken to be the content of the Western, including its imperialist design, what I want to stress first is the Western as an imaginative form which purveyed the experience, the thrill and exhilaration, of the exercise of enterprise. It is in the visceral qualities of the Western – surging through the land, galloping about on horseback, chases, the intensity and skill of fighting, exciting and jubilant music, stunning landscapes – that enterprise and imperialism have had their most undeliberated, powerful appeal.

These textual pleasures are made possible by the imaginary world in which they are grounded. The Western is set at a point in history when the project of the creation and settlement of a new society was underway but had been neither completed nor abandoned. When exactly that is, whether it ever was, is not the issue; what matters is the possibility of imagining that moment on the brink of making a society. It is carried by signs of pastness and a geographical location, whose imprecision in no way diminishes the mobilisation of an historical imagination.

The narrative energy of this moment is suggested by the phrase ‘Manifest Destiny’, coined in 1845 by John L. Sullivan, who wrote of ‘our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’ (quoted in Buscombe 1988: 180–1). Implicit in this, as in every Western, is a teleological narrative (a destiny), energetically and optimistically embraced, in the name of race (breeding, heterosexual reproduction) (cf. Horsman 1981). All this is dynamically crystallised in the image of the frontier. This is both a temporal and a spatial concept, not only in the sense of being the period and the place of establishing presence, but also in suggesting a dynamic that enables progress, the onward and upward march of the human spirit through time, that keeps pressing ahead into new territory (and eventually outer space, of course, ‘the final frontier’). Moreover, it signals a border between established and unestablished order, a border that is not crossed but pushed endlessly back.

The border is also of course between white and red peoples, which in turn specifies the nature of this border, namely that it establishes a border where there was none before. This is so not because there was no confrontation between white and red before this, but because the reds were borderless people, who had no concept of boundaries and of the order and civilisation that this bespeaks in the white imagination. From the first, the properness of the white occupation of the North American continent (and indeed of other territories to be colonised) was argued in terms of the fact that the indigenous people did not cultivate the land, did not order it and therefore did not realise the true human (but we will now say white) purpose towards creation.<sup>29</sup> White cultivation brings partition, geometry, boundedness to the land, it displays on the land the fact of human intervention, of enterprise. The frontier, and all the drama and excitement its establishment and maintenance entail, is about the act of bringing order in the form of borders to a land and people without them.

A whole series of tropes of whiteness proceed from this, widely noted in cultural history though not always named as white. Richard Slotkin's influential formulation, 'regeneration through violence', suggests why the characteristic violence of Westerns is so satisfying (for those for whom it is satisfying). Bar room brawls, seeing off the encircling Indians, man-to-man confrontation in the street shoot-out, such key moments, pleasures we expect when we go to a Western, resonate with the sense that an act of violence can sort things out, can raze the world of mess and encumbrances (like intractable land, recalcitrant indigenes, and bad elements within whiteness), can regenerate (a term with such a racial reproductive echo) the land, often by making of the desert a *tabula rasa* for the establishment of white society (Slotkin 1973, 1988).

Jane Tompkins uses the term *tabula rasa* to characterise another pleasure of the genre, the look and feel of the landscape. This 'blankness of the plain', she suggests,

implies – without ever stating – that this is a field where a certain kind of mastery is possible, where a person (of a certain kind) can remain alone and complete and in control of himself, while controlling the external world through physical strength and force of will.

(1992: 75)

Thus too the land, as imagined, calls forth qualities of character, themselves carried in physiognomy – the body of the white male (the person 'of a certain kind' whom Tompkins refers to), lean, sinewy, hard, taut, the cowboy as white male ego ideal. These figures in this landscape are intrinsic to the appeal of the Western:

The desert flatters the human figure by making it seem dominant and unique, dark against light, vertical against horizontal, solid against plain, detail against blankness. And the openness of the space means that domination can take place virtually through the act of opening one's eyes, through the act, even, of watching a representation on screen.

(ibid.: 74)

The Western is not all white exhilaration and glorification. It has elements that challenge optimism, that drag at the sense of energy and freedom, that complicate any idea of the white man as the citadel of right. The excitement of the Western can be accompanied by harshness and, as Tompkins stresses, a sense of death. The notion of 'manifest destiny' seems to lay the land out before the white gaze, so beautiful, so new, but it is not to be possessed without effort, suffering and loss. In many Westerns, it is true, the land is little more than a playground for white boys to let off steam, but in many others the sense of heat, grime, hunger, pain and death is keenly felt. This, though, only makes the conquest nobler, an agony of the will defining, as I have already suggested, white (male) identity. Similarly appearing to dim the image of the white West, the greatest threat in most Westerns comes not from the native peoples or Mexicans but from within, from bad whites. This does not however tarnish the white project. To make non-whites the greatest threat would accord them qualities of will and skill, of exercising spirit, which would make them the equivalent of white people.<sup>30</sup> It is, besides, part of the genre's realism to acknowledge the variation in white people; that is, the ways in which some white people fail to attain whiteness. Bad whites in Westerns are often associated with darkness, either in the iconography of black and white costuming (in early films, especially, but still evident in, for instance, *Warlock* (1959) or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)) or in their association with non-white Others, going native with Indian women, hanging about in Mexican bars and so on. The Western expunges such darkly coded bad apples the better to celebrate the struggle for whiteness.

The West constitutes a myth of origins for the USA, for a hundred years the leading edge of the white world. It stands in contrast to another such myth, the South. The West shows the construction of a (white) national identity centred on men and in the face of an indigenous ethnic other, whereas the South shows the construction of one centred on women and in the face of a forced immigrant other. This is realised spatially in the contrast between openness in the West and enclosedness in the South, wide open spaces rather than low down shrub and jungle, the exhilaration of the great outdoors rather than the claustrophobia of the mansion, and, in film, greater use of long and medium shots as opposed to close-ups; it is realised temporally in the overall contrast between movement and stasis, in the performance of broad and achieved actions as against restricted and blocked ones, in narratives of change and transformation as opposed to circularity,

entrapment and stagnation, in strong camera movement as against a still or unobtrusively moving camera, and cutting on action rather than cutting on stillness.

This contrast is between two genres of national origins, but one, the Western, is a success genre, the other a failure. The first involves a people massively destroyed by white imperialism, guilt for which only developed as the genre itself declined, whereas the second involves a people forced to be on North American soil, the guilt for which was far more widely felt by white people, for whom African-Americans were a constant presence, in the major cities, on the railroad network, as domestic servants. The West shows success in conquering a land and establishing an order upon it, incorporating the indigenous people into the sweep of that history; the South is a failure to do with labour. In the West, despite some books and films that deliberately addressed the issue of miscegenation, the purity of whiteness is largely maintained. This is not least because it is a profoundly homosocial, unheterosexual form, often focusing on a world without women, one whose primary and foundational relationships are between men; only at the end may the hero settle with a woman to ensure that his place in the land is reproduced. In the South, however, founded as it is on breeding (of slaves and of white dynasties), troubled by the most extreme expression of the contradiction, touched on above, between the need for white ladies to reproduce and the requirement of their extreme bodily refinement, the question of sexuality and lineage, of white purity, is always more complex. I have argued elsewhere (Dyer 1995) that even in as wholeheartedly white supremacist a text as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), there is a suspicion that the South is not truly white enough to found the white nation of the film's title: it recurrently has recourse to Northern imagery, characters, stars (Lillian Gish) and even light (see [Chapter 3](#)) to regenerate the doubtfully pure white South. In short, the South seems to be the myth that both most consciously asserts whiteness and most devastatingly undermines it, whereas the West takes the project of whiteness for granted and achieved.

The comparison of the myths of the West and the South suggests that a female-centred representation of white imperialism will deal in stasis and failure, a theme discussed in [Chapter 5](#); but at the same time male imperialism is presented as done for white women as, at any rate, the literal and socialising reproducers of the race. In a discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss' analyses of tribal mythologies, Cleo McNelly relates the gendered placing of white people in imperialism in relation to the kind of binaristic thinking touched on elsewhere in this book. She suggests that imperialism (and anthropology) are represented in the motif of the journey, which is posited on a notion of 'here and there, home and abroad' (1975: 9), which in turn reproduces two figures, 'the white woman at home and her polar opposite, the black woman abroad' (10). The geographical structure of imperial narrative confirms the binarism discussed above, the white woman as the locus of true whiteness, white men in struggle, yearning for home and whiteness, facing the dangers and allures of darkness. This naturalises white gender difference not so much in givens of the body but in the psychic structures produced in the imperial encounter with the world.

The Western as (man-led, woman-inspired) success myth allows us to experience a sense of white historical mastery of time and space. Typically, narrative unfolds in unentangled, linear story-lines leading to a happy ending, and we return repeatedly to an uninterrupted view of the land. The latter draws on a tradition of seeing the land developed in Western<sup>31</sup> painting since the seventeenth century. The idea of a landscape, framed and perspectively organised, suggests a position from which to view the world, one that is distant and separate. Moreover, the very grasping and ordering of the land on canvas or in a photograph suggests a knowledge of it, bringing it under human control. Even the wildest, most dwarfing landscapes may also suggest Western man's heroic facing up to the elements or at any rate, in his apprehension of their sublimity, making him aware of his special perception of the divine.<sup>32</sup> Some of the most successful landscape traditions have in any case not stressed awesomeness but manageability. A typical example, such as Jens Jue's *The Kyberg Family Portrait* (1796–7) (colour [Plate 1](#)) shows a land fully possessed by those who own it (their home is at the centre of the image, the vigorous male gesturing to both the land and his wife), who none the less are not in it, but stand before it as before a painted backdrop; moreover, the land has not obviously been submitted to the geometry of modern agriculture or continental European gardening traditions – it is mastered, but through subtle knowledge of how to possess it, rather than through inappropriate imposition. In a more evidently colonial context, Ella Shohat (1991) has discussed the importance of the figure of the explorer/scientist in film who gives the spectator knowledge of land of which he is emphatically not a part, and the role of images of maps and globes in fixing this within a comprehensive, scientific ambit. Similarly,

Martin Stollery discusses the development in British documentary in the 1930s of a genre of aerial film, in which the sense of encompassing the world imperial is reproduced in films that take the (implicitly white) viewer on trips to exotic lands. A particular editing trope of this genre shows a native person looking up at the sky, shading his or her eyes from the sun, trying to see the plane they can hear, followed by a cut to a shot taken from an aircraft looking down on the land, visual master of all that it surveys (Stollery 1994: 310–27, 334–5).

Such representations of the land presuppose an aesthetic (and not even necessarily a literal) distance from it, wittily evoked in a passage about landscape in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), where the heroine, Catherine, takes a walk on the hills outside Bath with the Tilney family:

The Tilneys ... were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing; and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste.... Catherine ... confessed and lamented her want of knowledge; declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which [Henry's] instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him; and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances and second distances; side-screens and perspectives; lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape.

(Austen 1985: 125–6)

What is especially interesting in this passage, in addition to the account of a particular sense of how to order nature into a landscape and the role of the man in defining this, is the idea that Catherine learns what is then judged to be an unlearned ('natural') taste – by conforming to a male (and, my argument is, white) conception of things she attains to a fundamental state of human perception. This is an instance of what David Lloyd calls the narrative of aesthetic judgement, itself in eighteenth-century philosophy constitutive of the idea of a 'public sphere', a 'disinterested domain of culture' whose historical development is seen 'as the ethical end of humanity itself' (Lloyd 1991: 64).

Lloyd argues that Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) implies a narrative of human development, in which the senses are organised to move beyond particular, local sensations to a recognition of universal forms, a move which can only be made if a human attains to a position of disinterest, becomes what Lloyd terms a 'subject without properties' (ibid.). This narrative applies equally to the individual and to the human race as a whole – but non-white peoples are presumed to be still, and perhaps forever, at the stage of 'particular, local sensations', not having made the move to disinterested subjecthood. What is involved is not the ascription of racial inferiority, much less evil, to non-whites but their not being deemed subjects without properties. They are particular, marked, raced, whereas the white man has attained the position of being without properties, unmarked, universal, just human. Lloyd indicates two stages of this in the history of colonialism. First, the subject without properties is

the philosophical figure for what becomes, with increasing literalness throughout the nineteenth century, the global ubiquity of the white European. His domination is virtually self-legitimizing since the capacity to be everywhere present becomes an historical manifestation of the white man's gradual approximation to the universality he everywhere represents.

(ibid.: 70)

Second,

in the post-colonial era, immigration from former colonies is a source of especial ideological scandal not least because it upsets the asymmetrical distribution of humanity into the local (native) and the universal.

(ibid.)

Following Lloyd's account, racial theories as such and even the aspirational structure of enterprise and imperialism are less crucial to the development of white identity than the attainment of a position of

disinterest – abstraction, distance, separation, objectivity – which creates a public sphere that is the mark of civilisation, itself the aim of human history. It is that position which interests me here. It provides the philosophical underpinning of the conception of white people (and, as I explore in [Chapter 2](#), the colour white itself) as everything and nothing. It suggests the sense in which the viewpoint of a text (how, in its formal organisation, it sees its subject matter) may legitimately be characterised as white (as well as male and upper or middle class). It is a position of such notable, albeit catastrophic, success in the world that it is one that many people neither white, male nor middle class, may aspire to take up.

Yet it also suggests two problems. First, in a visual culture, the position of being without properties is also an odd one. It is after all not the case that only women and non-white men are shown in paintings, plays, photographs and films – if anything, rather the contrary. Moreover, the appearance of white people in colonialism, what Mohanty calls ‘the white man as spectacle’, is very much part of the way authority is maintained through its display, just as the dominance of US media has kept the white man at the centre of global representation. The subject without properties – very much the subject rather than the object of scientific, including racial, investigation (as discussed above) as well as the addressee of much of Western art and media – none the less has to be seen, which means being represented as having some properties or other. This is negotiated by various means – the pattern of looks in cinema, for instance, which tends to make the dominating look that of the white male,<sup>33</sup> the production of stars who are at once special and ordinary, the assumption of universality in the muscleman films discussed in [Chapter 4](#) – but its successful negotiation cannot be taken for granted, and constitutes an instability at the heart of the representation of whiteness.

Second, Lloyd's discussion suggests the degree to which whiteness aspires to *dis*-embodiedness. To be without properties also suggests not being at all. This may be thought of as pure spirit, but it also hints at non-existence, or death. This is explored as colourlessness in the next chapter, as dissolving transcendence in [Chapter 3](#), as a narrative impotence in [Chapter 5](#) and as death in the final chapter.

White identity is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vividly corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body; a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, an individual and a universal subject; a commitment to heterosexuality that, for whiteness to be affirmed, entails men fighting against sexual desires and women having none; a stress on the display of spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need always to be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent, both alive and dead. Paradoxes are fascinating, endlessly drawing us back to them, either in awe at their unfathomability or else out of a wish to fathom them. Paradoxes provide the instabilities that generate stories, millions of engrossing attempts to find resolution. The dynamism of white instability, especially in its claims to universality, is also what entices those outside to seek to cross its borders and those inside to aspire ever upwards within it. Thus it is that the paradoxes and instabilities of whiteness also constitute its flexibility and productivity, in short, its representational power.



## Coloured white, not coloured



*Plate 2.1* Sandy Huffaker 'White is a flesh colored band aid', from Preston Wilcox (ed.) *White Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1970)

White people are neither literally nor symbolically white. We are not the colour of snow or bleached linen, nor are we uniquely virtuous and pure. Yet images of white people are recognisable as such by virtue of colour.

This chapter considers the implications of a particular group of people being categorised by means of the colour white. This does not mean that I consider colour to be the prime cause of racial distinction and racism,<sup>1</sup> but it is part of the way that racial identity is thought and felt about, and is of particular significance in a culture so bound up with the visual and visible.

Colour is not the only visible physical characteristic that is used to designate white people as white, something that will be touched on in the next section. Moreover, to apply the colour white to white people is to ascribe a visible property to a group that thrives also on invisibility. I discuss this on pages 44–5. None the less, I am focusing on colour. The fact that we are called and call ourselves white suggests the centrality of notions of colour to white representation. Other things may designate us as white and we may not be literally white, yet a colour term, white, is the primary means by which we are identified.