WHITE PEOPLE ARE NOT LITERALLY OR SYMBOLICALLY WHITE, YET THEY ARE CALLED WHITE. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? In Western media, whites take up the position of ordinariness, not a particular race, just the human race. How is this achieved? *White* takes these questions as starting points for an examination of the representation of whiteness by whites in Western visual culture.

While racial representation is central to the organisation of the contemporary world, white people remain a largely unexamined category in sharp contrast to the many studies of images of black and Asian peoples. In *White*, Richard Dyer looks beyond the apparent unremarkability of whiteness and argues for the importance of analysing images of white people.

Dyer places this representation within the contexts of Christianity, 'race' and colonialism. In a series of absorbing case studies, he shows the construction of whiteness in the technology of photography and film as part of a wider 'culture of light', discusses heroic white masculinity in muscle-man action cinema, from *Tarzan* and *Hercules* to *Conan* and *Rambo*; analyses the stifling role of white women in end-of-empire fictions like *The Jewel in the Crown* and traces the associations of whiteness with death in *Falling Down*, horror movies and cult dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* and the *Aliens* trilogy.

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Richard Dyer is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Warwick. He has written on stars, entertainment and representation, and lesbian and gay culture. He is the author of *Heavenly Bodies*, *Now You See It*, *Only Entertainment*, *The Matter of Images*, and *Brief Encounter*.

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WHITE

Richard Dyer

London and New York

Contents

Plates

Black and white plates

Colour plates

The colour plate section falls between pp. 144–5

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This book is a study of the representation of white people in white Western culture. The issues and problems – personal, political, methodological, conceptual – of such an undertaking are themselves the subjects of much of the book. Here I want to say something briefly about the fact that it is about representation and to indicate the way in which it is organised.

My focus is representation. Thus, on the one hand, what follows is not directly about how white people really are, how we feel about ourselves, how others perceive us. These concerns have been addressed by other writers[1] on whom I draw, but they are not the direct topic of this book. This is about how white people are represented, how we represent ourselves – images of white people, or the cultural construction of white people, to use two standard formulations for such work. On the other hand, how anything is represented is the means by which we think and feel about that thing, by which we apprehend it. The study of representation is more limited than the study of reality and yet it is also the study of one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality. This book is then a study of what is available to us, all of us, to make sense of white people – and I emphasise both the making involved, the production of ideas of peoples, and the full affective, sensuous weight of the word *sense* as well as its more cerebral one. Thus, while I want to be sure no reader expects to find what is not here, interviews with people of whatever colour about white people, for instance, or analysis of the historical and sociological patterns of existence of white people, I also want to insist that what follows is not therefore 'merely' about representation.

To this should be added two points. The study refers to white makings of whiteness within Western culture, because white people have had so very much more control over the definition of themselves and indeed of others than have those others. Second, I am primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with visual (principally photographic) representations. However, sight has been a privileged sense in Western culture since the middle ages, and since the mid-nineteenth century the photographic media have become central and authoritative means of knowledge, thought and feeling. Thus,

again, there is nothing 'mere' about the limitation of focusing on the visual and photographic.

The book is organised in a movement from the most general to the most particular. Chapter 1 ('The matter of whiteness') considers some of the general methodological and conceptual issues involved. I start with the in fact highly particular topic of my own relationship to the subject, in order to situate what follows in the particularity of the person who is writing it. I do not intend thereby to collapse whiteness into my own subjectivity, nor to claim to speak for all white people; but nor do I believe that knowledge exists independently of actual people knowing. Moreover, the position of speaking as a white person is one that white people now almost never acknowledge and this is part of the condition and power of whiteness: white people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realising, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness. The impulse behind this book is to come to see that position of white authority in order to help undermine it. It seems only proper then that I start by talking about *this* white person's position.

Thereafter in Chapter 1 I deal with more genuinely general frameworks: political and methodological issues and some key concepts underpinning the analysis of the rest of the book. I organise these around a notion of 'embodiment', the idea of an exercise of spirit within but not of the body in a mode that, as inflected by Christianity, 'race' and imperialism, comes to define the visible white person. Chapter 2 ('Coloured white, not coloured') narrows the focus to a particular aspect of white representation, namely the use of a colour to signify a social group and what it means that this colour, white, is used to represent this particular group. Chapter 3 ('The light of the world') is also still concerned with the general frameworks through which we see, think and feel about white people, but concentrated here on a particular medium, photography and film, and its historical development in relation to the white face. While chapters 1 and 2 address topics that themselves draw attention to the fact of whiteness, 'The light of the world' looks at an aesthetic technology – a particular medium and its habitual use – that offers itself as neutral with regard to social difference but is in fact profoundly, though not irremediably, shaped by it.

Case studies – particular texts and groups of texts – are used throughout the above, but it is only in the two penultimate chapters that they become the focus of attention. These are, in Chapter 4 ('The white man's muscles'), a grouping of films (adventure films with muscleman stars), itself divisible into further genres or cycles (the Tarzan and Rambo films and especially the Italian 'peplum' films of the late 1950s and early 1960s), and, in Chapter 5 ('"There's nothing I can do! Nothing!"'), one, albeit very long (fifteen-hour) text, the television serial *The Jewel in the Crown*.

In a work of this kind, there must always be an interaction between generalisations and specific instances, between the theoretical and empirical.

Theory needs checking against the particularity and the sheer intractable messiness of any given example; but equally, no cultural production is ever apprehended except through the frameworks that are brought to bear on it, of which theoretical constructs are only a particularly self-reflexive and elaborated kind. I have tried to be explicit about selection: why was this case chosen? Of what is it a case? The instances in the final chapters were indeed selected because they seemed prima facie to enable the exploration of issues raised in the more general chapters, but they also represent particular modes of cultural production and consumption. I approach both, broadly speaking, in terms of genre; that is, traditions of cultural production wider than one particular text and known, albeit differentially, by producers and consumers alike. Chapter 4, however, treats a genre (and a particular sub-genre), homing in on particular texts as exemplars, whereas Chapter 5 focuses on one text, using generic reference to inform the reading of it. The genres in question also suggest other cultural constructions to do with both class and gender. I hope I still see the whiteness that cuts across these particularities, while also registering the fact that whiteness never exists separately from specific class, gender or other socio-cultural inflections.

The gradual narrowing of focus as the book proceeds is stemmed some-what in the final chapter ('White death') by opening out not to an overall conclusion but to a theme that runs throughout the book, the association of whiteness and death. Methodologically, this Chapter is rather different from the rest, in that it is more a reading of a number of films than either a theoretical disquisition or a case study. It is a reading prompted by what has gone before and developed in relation to the detail of the films themselves, but less culturally and historically grounded. It tries to identify a feeling surfacing in moments of white contemporary popular culture, a sense of the dead end of whiteness.

1

The matter of whiteness

Racial[1] imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidised and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. The myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at every point informed by judgements about people's capacities and worth, judgements based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgements. Race is not the only factor governing these things and people of goodwill everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play. And since race in itself – insofar as it is anything in itself – refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(hooks 1992: 167)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a white man

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

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

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

My mother recently told me a story about myself that she had never 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.

5

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

6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The politics of looking at whiteness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(McIntosh 1988: 5–9)

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

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

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

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

9

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