

# THE SPECTACLE OF THE 'OTHER'

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## I Introduction

How do we represent people and places which are significantly different from us? Why is 'difference' so compelling a theme, so contested an area of representation? What is the secret fascination of 'otherness', and why is popular representation so frequently drawn to it? What are the typical forms and representational practices which are used to represent 'difference' in popular culture today, and where did these popular figures and stereotypes come from? These are some of the questions about representation which we set out to address in this chapter. We will pay particular attention to those representational practices which we call 'stereotyping'. By the end we hope you will understand better how what we call 'the spectacle of the "Other"' works, and be able to apply the ideas discussed and the sorts of analysis undertaken here to the mass of related materials in contemporary popular culture – for example, advertising which uses black models, newspaper reports about immigration, racial attacks or urban crime, and films and magazines which deal with 'race' and ethnicity as significant themes.

The theme of 'representing difference' is picked up directly from the previous chapter, where Henrietta Lidchi looked at how 'other cultures' are given meaning by the discourses and practices of exhibition in ethnographic museums of 'the West'. Chapter 3 focused on the 'poetics' and the 'politics' of exhibiting – both how other cultures are made to signify through the discourses of exhibition (poetics) and how these practices are inscribed by relations of power (politics) – especially those which prevail between the people who are represented and the cultures and institutions doing the representing. Many of the same concerns arise again in this chapter. However, here, *racial and ethnic* difference is foregrounded. You should bear in mind, however, that what is said about racial difference could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability.

Our focus here is the variety of images which are on display in popular culture and the mass media. Some are commercial advertising images and magazine illustrations which use racial stereotypes, dating from the period of slavery or from the popular imperialism of the late nineteenth century. However, Chapter 4 brings the story up to the present. Indeed, it begins with images from the competitive world of modern athletics. The question which this comparison across time poses is: have the repertoires of representation around 'difference' and 'otherness' changed or do earlier traces remain intact in contemporary society?

The chapter looks in depth at theories about the representational practice known as 'stereotyping'. However, the theoretical discussion is threaded through the examples, rather than being introduced for its own sake. The chapter ends by considering a number of different strategies designed to intervene in the field of representation, to contest 'negative' images and transform representational practices around 'race' in a more 'positive'

direction. It poses the question of whether there can be an effective ‘politics of representation’.

Once again, then, *visual* representation takes centre stage. The chapter sustains the overall theme by continuing our exploration of *representation* as a concept and a practice – the key first ‘moment’ in the cultural circuit. Our aim is to deepen our understanding of what representation is and how it works. Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way. This is why we need theories – to deepen our analysis. The chapter, then, builds on what we have already learned about representation as a signifying practice, and continues to develop critical concepts to explain its operations.

## 1.1 Heroes or villains?

Look, first, at Figure 4.1. It is a picture of the men’s 100 metres final at the 1988 Olympics which appeared on the cover of the Olympics Special of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine (9 October 1988). It shows the black Canadian sprinter, Ben Johnson, winning in record time from Carl Lewis and Linford Christie: five superb athletes in action, at the peak of their physical prowess. All of them men and – perhaps, now, you will notice consciously for the first time – all of them black!

### ACTIVITY 1

How do you ‘read’ the picture – what is it saying? In Barthes’ terms, what is its ‘myth’ – its underlying message?

One possible message relates to their racial identity. These athletes are all from a racially-defined group – one often discriminated against precisely on the grounds of their ‘race’ and colour, whom we are more accustomed to see depicted in the news as the victims or ‘losers’ in terms of achievement. Yet here they are, winning!

In terms of difference, then – a positive message: a triumphant moment, a cause for celebration. Why, then, does the caption say, ‘Heroes and villains’? Who do you think is the hero, who the villain?

Even if you don’t follow athletics, the answer isn’t difficult to discover. Ostensibly about the Olympics, the photo is in fact a trailer for the magazine’s lead story about the growing menace of drug-taking in international athletics – what inside is called ‘The Chemical Olympics’. Ben Johnson, you may recall, was found to have taken drugs to enhance his performance. He was disqualified, the gold medal being awarded to Carl Lewis, and Johnson was expelled from world athletics in disgrace. The story suggests that *all* athletes – black or white – are potentially ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’. But in this image, Ben Johnson personifies this split in a particular way. He is *both* ‘hero’ and

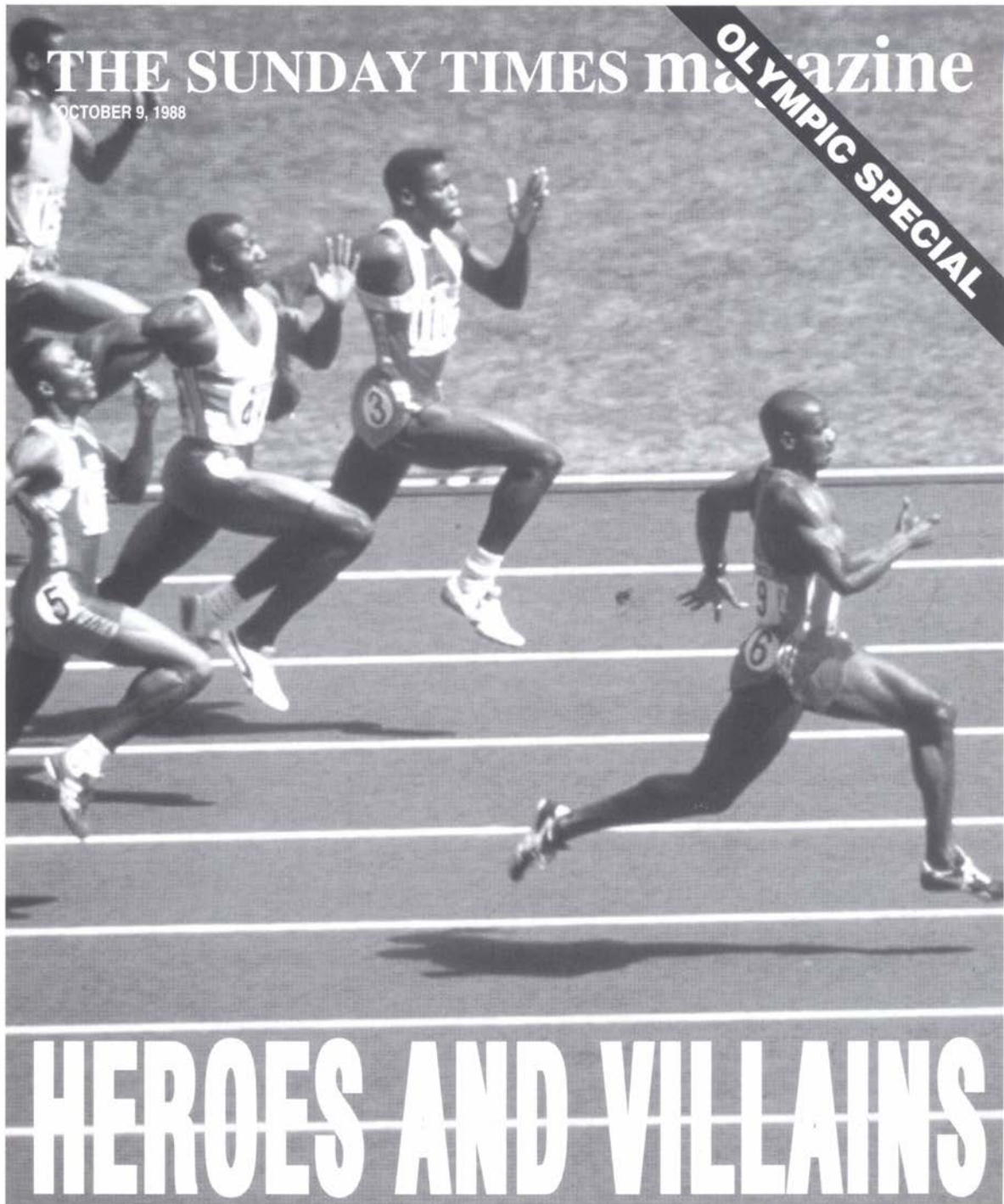


FIGURE 4.1 'Heroes and Villains', cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 9 October 1988.

‘villain’. He encapsulates the extreme alternatives of heroism and villainy in world athletics in one black body.

There are several points to make about the way the representation of ‘race’ and ‘otherness’ is working in this photo. First, if you think back to Chapters 1 and 3, you will remember the work of Barthes on the idea of ‘myth’. This photo, too, functions at the level of ‘myth’. There is a literal, denotative level of meaning – this *is* a picture of the 100 metres final and the figure in front *is* Ben Johnson. Then there is the more connotative or thematic meaning – the drug story. And within that, there is the sub-theme of ‘race’ and ‘difference’. Already, this tells us something important about how ‘myth’ works. The image is a very powerful one, as visual images often are. But its *meaning* is highly ambiguous. It can carry more than one meaning. If you didn’t know the context, you might be tempted to read this as a moment of unqualified triumph. And you wouldn’t be ‘wrong’ since this, too, is a perfectly acceptable meaning to take from the image. But, as the caption suggests, it is *not* produced here as an image of ‘unqualified triumph’. So, the same photo can carry several, quite different, sometimes diametrically opposite meanings. It can be a picture of disgrace or of triumph, or both. Many meanings, we might say, are potential within the photo. But there is no one, true meaning. Meaning ‘floats’. It cannot be finally fixed. However, attempting to ‘fix’ it is the work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one.

So, rather than a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ meaning, what we need to ask is, ‘Which of the many meanings in this image does the magazine mean to privilege?’ Which is the **preferred meaning**? Ben Johnson is the key element here because he is both an amazing athlete, winner and record-breaker, *and* the athlete who was publicly disgraced because of drug-taking. So, as it turns out, the preferred meaning is *both* ‘heroism’ and ‘villainy’. It wants to say something paradoxical like, ‘In the moment of the hero’s triumph, there is also villainy and moral defeat.’ In part, we know this is the preferred meaning which the magazine wants the photo to convey because this is the meaning which is singled out in the caption: HEROES AND VILLAINS. Roland Barthes (1977) argues that, frequently, it is the caption which selects one out of the many possible meanings from the image, and *anchors* it with words. The ‘meaning’ of the photograph, then, does not lie exclusively in the image, but in the conjunction of image *and* text. Two discourses – the discourse of written language and the discourse of photography – are required to produce and ‘fix’ the meaning (see Hall, 1972).

preferred meaning

As we have suggested, this photo can also be ‘read’, connotatively, in terms of what it has to ‘say’ about ‘race’. Here, the message could be – black people shown being good at something, winning *at last!* But in the light of the ‘preferred meaning’, hasn’t the meaning with respect to ‘race’ and ‘otherness’ changed as well? Isn’t it more something like, ‘even when black people are shown at the summit of their achievement, they often fail to carry it off’? This



**FIGURE 4.2** Linford Christie, holding a Union Jack, having won the men's 100 metres Olympic gold medal, Barcelona 1992.

having-it-both-ways is important because, as I hope to show you, people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time!* We will return to these split figures or ‘tropes’ of representation in a moment.

But first, let us look at another, similar news photo, this time from another record-breaking

100 metres final. Linford Christie, subsequently captain of the British Olympics squad, at the peak of his career, having just won the race of a lifetime. The picture captures his elation, at the moment of his lap of honour. He is holding the Union Jack. In the light of the earlier discussion, how do you ‘read’ *this* photograph (Figure 4.2)? What is it ‘saying’ about ‘race’ and cultural identity?

#### ACTIVITY 2

Which of the following statements, in your view, comes closest to expressing the ‘message’ of the image?

- ‘This is the greatest moment of my life! A triumph for me, Linford Christie.’
- ‘This is a moment of triumph for me and a celebration for black people everywhere!’
- ‘This is a moment of triumph and celebration for the British Olympic team and the British people!’
- ‘This is a moment of triumph and celebration for black people *and* the British Olympic team. It shows that you can be “Black” *and* “British”!’

There is, of course, no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer to the question. The image carries many meanings, all equally plausible. What is important is the fact that this image both shows an event (denotation) and carries a ‘message’ or meaning (connotation) – Barthes would call it a ‘meta-message’ or *myth* – about ‘race’, colour and ‘otherness’. We can’t help reading images of this kind

as ‘saying something’, not just about the people or the occasion, but about their ‘otherness’, their ‘difference’. ‘*Difference*’ has been marked. How it is then interpreted is a constant and recurring preoccupation in the representation of people who are racially and ethnically different from the majority population. Difference signifies. It ‘speaks’.

In a later interview, discussing his forthcoming retirement from international sport, Christie commented on the question of his cultural identity – where he feels he ‘belongs’ (*The Sunday Independent*, 11 November 1995). He has very fond memories of Jamaica, he said, where he was born and lived until the age of 7. But ‘I’ve lived here [in the UK] for 28 [years]. I can’t be anything other than British’ (p. 18). Of course, it isn’t as simple as that. Christie is perfectly well aware that most definitions of ‘Britishness’ assume that the person who belongs is ‘white’. It is much harder for black people, wherever they were born, to be accepted as ‘British’. In 1995, the cricket magazine, *Wisden*, had to pay libel damages to black athletes for saying that they couldn’t be expected to display the same loyalty and commitment to winning for England because they are black. So Christie knows that every image is *also* being ‘read’ in terms of this broader question of cultural belongingness and difference.

Indeed, he made his remarks in the context of the negative publicity to which he has been exposed in some sections of the British tabloid press, a good deal of which hinges on a vulgar, unstated but widely recognized ‘joke’ at his expense: namely that the tight-fitting Lycra shorts which he wears are said to reveal the size and shape of his genitals. This was the detail on which *The Sun* focused on the morning after he won an Olympic gold medal. Christie has been subject to continuous teasing in the tabloid press about the prominence and size of his ‘lunchbox’ – a euphemism which some have taken so literally that, he revealed, he has been approached by a firm wanting to market its lunchboxes around his image! Linford Christie has observed about these innuendoes: ‘I felt humiliated ... My first instinct was that it was racist. There we are, stereotyping a black man. I can take a good joke. But it happened the day after I won the greatest accolade an athlete can win ... I don’t want to go through life being known for what I’ve got in my shorts. I’m a serious person ...’ (p. 15).

### ACTIVITY 3

What is going on here? Is this just a joke in bad taste, or does it have a deeper meaning? What do sexuality and gender have to do with images of black men and women? Why did the black French writer from Martinique, Frantz Fanon, say that white people seem to be obsessed with the sexuality of black people?

It is the subject of a widespread fantasy, Fanon says, which fixates the black man at the level of the genitals. ‘One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis’ (Fanon, 1986/1952, p. 170).

What, for example, did the French writer, Michael Cournot, whom Fanon quotes, mean when he wrote that 'Four Negroes with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral'? (Fanon, 1986/1952, p. 169). What *is* the relationship of these fantasies of sexuality to 'race' and ethnicity in the representation of 'otherness' and 'difference'?

We have now introduced another dimension into the representation of 'difference' – adding sexuality and gender to 'race', ethnicity and colour. Of course, it is well established that sport is one of the few areas where black people have had outstanding success. It seems natural that images of black people drawn from sport should emphasize the body, which is the instrument of athletic skill and achievement. It is difficult, however, to have images of bodies in action, at the peak of their physical perfection, without those images also, in some way, carrying 'messages' about *gender* and about *sexuality*. Where black athletes are concerned, what are these messages about?

#### ACTIVITY 4

Look, for example, at the picture from the *Sunday Times* 1988 Olympic Special, of the black American sprinter, Florence Griffith-Joyner, who won three gold medals at Seoul (Figure 4.3). Can you 'read' this photo without getting some 'messages' about 'race', gender and sexuality – even if *what* the meanings are remain ambiguous? Is there any doubt that the photo is 'signifying' along all three dimensions? In representation, one sort of difference seems to attract others – adding up to a 'spectacle' of



**FIGURE 4.3** Florence Griffith-Joyner.

otherness. If you're not convinced, you might think of this in the context of the remark by 'Flo-Jo's' husband, Al Joyner, quoted in the text next to the photo: 'Someone Says My Wife Looked Like A Man'. Or consider the photo (which was reproduced on the following page of the article) of Al Joyner's sister, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, who also won a gold medal and broke world records at Seoul in the heptathlon, preparing to throw a javelin, accompanied by text quoting another observation by Al Joyner: 'Somebody Says My Sister Looked Like A Gorilla'(Figure 4.4).

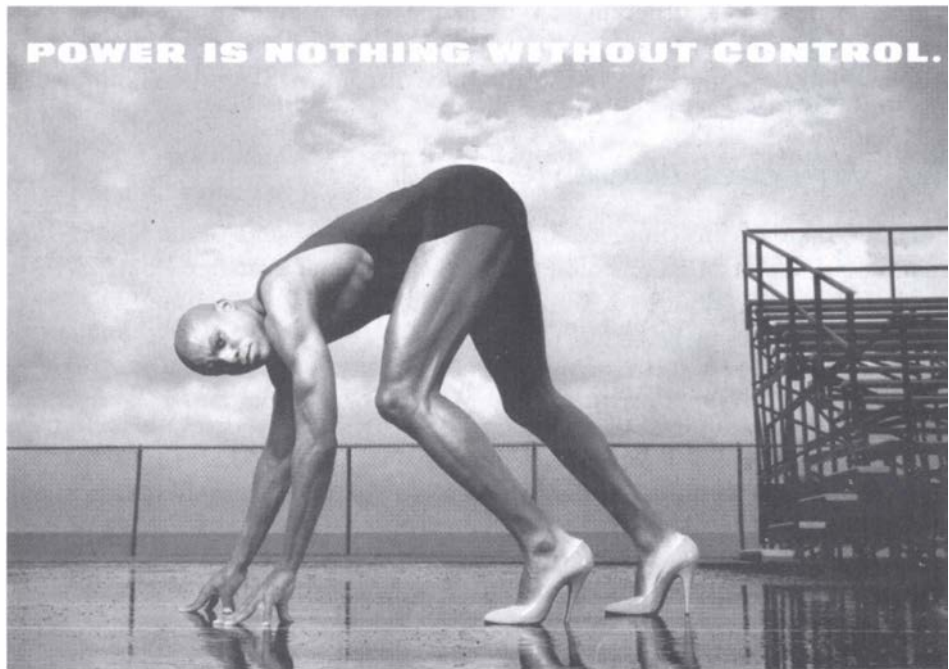


**FIGURE 4.4** Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

There is an additional point to be made about these photographs of black athletes in the press. They gain in meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another. This is another way of saying that images do not carry meaning or 'signify' on their own. They accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media. Each image carries its own, specific meaning. But at the broader level of how 'difference' and 'otherness' is being represented in a particular culture at any one moment, we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another. This accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of other images, is called **inter-textuality**. We may describe the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which 'difference' is represented at any one historical moment as a *regime of representation*; this is very similar to what, in Chapter 2, Peter Hamilton referred to as a *representational paradigm*.

inter-textuality

An interesting example of *inter-textuality*, where the image depends for its meaning on being 'read' in relation to a number of other, similar images, can be found in Figure 4.5. This is Carl Lewis, one of the sprinters you saw in Figure 4.1, taken from a Pirelli advertisement. At first glance, the image summons up echoes of all the previous images we have been looking at – superbly-honed athletic bodies, tensed in action, super-men and super-women. But here the meaning is differently inflected. Pirelli is a tyre firm with a reputation for producing calendars with pictures of beautiful women, scantily clad, in provocative poses – the prototypical 'pin-up'. In which of these two contexts should we 'read' the Carl Lewis image? One clue lies in the fact that, though Lewis is male, in the ad he is wearing elegant, high-heeled red shoes!



**FIGURE 4.5**  
Carl Lewis,  
photographed for  
a Pirelli  
advertisement.

#### ACTIVITY 5

What is *this* image saying? What is *its* message? How does it 'say' it?

This image works by the marking of 'difference'. The conventional identification of Lewis with black male athletes and with a sort of 'super-masculinity' is disturbed and undercut by the invocation of his 'femininity' – and what marks this is the signifier of the red shoes. The sexual and racial 'message' is rendered ambiguous. The super-male black athlete may not be all he seems. The ambiguity is amplified when we compare this image with all the other images – the stereotypes we are accustomed to see – of black athletes in the press. Its meaning is inter-textual – i.e. it requires to be read 'against the grain'.

### ACTIVITY 6

Does this photo reinforce or subvert the stereotype? Some people say it's just an advertiser's joke. Some argue that Carl Lewis has allowed himself to be exploited by a big corporate advertiser. Others argue that he deliberately set out to challenge and contest the traditional image of black masculinity. What do you think?

In the light of these examples, we can rephrase our original questions more precisely. Why is 'otherness' so compelling an object of representation? What does the marking of racial difference tell us about representation as a practice? Through which representational practices are racial and ethnic difference and 'otherness' signified? What are the 'discursive formations', the repertoires or regimes of representation, on which the media are drawing when they represent 'difference'? Why is one dimension of difference – e.g. 'race' – crossed by other dimensions, such as sexuality, gender and class? And how is the representation of 'difference' linked with questions of power?

## 1.2 Why does 'difference' matter?

Before we analyse any more examples, let us examine some of the underlying issues posed by our first question. Why does 'difference' matter – how can we explain this fascination with 'otherness'? What theoretical arguments can we draw on to help us unpack this question?

Questions of 'difference' have come to the fore in cultural studies in recent decades and been addressed in different ways by different disciplines. In this section, we briefly consider *four* such theoretical accounts. As we discuss them, think back to the examples we have just analysed. In each, we start by showing how important 'difference' is – by considering what is said to be its positive aspect. But we follow this by some of the more negative aspects of 'difference'. Putting these two together suggests why 'difference' is both necessary and dangerous.

1 The first account comes from linguistics – from the sort of approach associated with Saussure and the use of language as a model of how culture works, which was discussed in Chapter 1. The main argument advanced here is that *'difference' matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist*. You may remember from Chapter 1 the example of *white/black*. We know what *black* means, Saussure argued, not because there is some essence of 'blackness' but because we can contrast it with its opposite – *white*. Meaning, he argued, is relational. It is the *'difference'* between *white* and *black* which signifies, which carries meaning. Carl Lewis in that photo can represent 'femininity' or the 'feminine' side of masculinity because he can *mark his 'difference'* from the traditional stereotypes of black masculinity by using the *red shoes* as a signifier. This principle holds for broader concepts too. We know what it is to be 'British', not only because of certain national characteristics, but also because we can mark its 'difference'

from its 'others' – 'Britishness' is not-French, not-American, not-German, not-Pakistani, not-Jamaican and so on. This enables Linford Christie to signify his 'Britishness' (by the flag) while contesting (by his black skin) that 'Britishness' must always mean 'whiteness'. Again, 'difference' signifies. It carries a message.

So meaning depends on the difference between opposites. However, when we discussed this argument in Chapter 1, we recognized that, though binary oppositions – *white/black*, *day/night*, *masculine/feminine*, *British/alien* – have the great value of capturing the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning. For example, in so-called black-and-white photography, there is actually no pure 'black' or 'white', only varying shades of grey. 'Black' shades imperceptibly into 'white', just as men have *both* 'masculine' and 'feminine' sides to their nature; and Linford Christie certainly wants to affirm the possibility of being both 'black' *and* 'British' though the normal definition of 'Britishness' assumes that it is white.

Thus, while we do not seem able to do without them, binary oppositions are also open to the charge of being reductionist and over-simplified – swallowing up all distinctions in their rather rigid two-part structure. What is more, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued, there are very few neutral binary oppositions. One pole of the binary, he argues, is usually the dominant one, the one which includes the other within its field of operations. There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition (Derrida, 1974). We should really write, **white/black**, **men/women**, **masculine/feminine**, **upper class/lower class**, **British/alien** to capture this power dimension in discourse.

2 The second explanation also comes from theories of language, but from a somewhat different school to that represented by Saussure. *The argument here is that we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other'*. The great Russian linguist and critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, who fell foul of the Stalinist regime in the 1940s, studied language, not (as the Saussureans did) as an objective system, but in terms of how meaning is sustained in the *dialogue* between two or more speakers. Meaning, Bakhtin argued, does not belong to any one speaker. It arises in the give-and-take between different speakers. 'The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when ... the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic expressive intention. Prior to this ... the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language ... rather it exists in other people's mouths, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own' (Bakhtin, 1981 [1935], pp. 293–4). Bakhtin and his collaborator, Volosinov, believed that this enabled us to enter into a struggle over meaning, breaking one set of associations and giving words a new inflection. Meaning, Bakhtin argued, is established through dialogue – it is fundamentally *dialogic*. Everything we say and mean is modified by the interaction and interplay with another

person. Meaning arises through the 'difference' between the participants in any dialogue. *The 'Other', in short, is essential to meaning.*

This is the positive side of Bakhtin's theory. The negative side is, of course, that therefore meaning cannot be fixed and that one group can never be completely in charge of meaning. What it means to be 'British' or 'Russian' or 'Jamaican' cannot be entirely controlled by the British, Russians or Jamaicans, but is always up for grabs, always being negotiated, in the dialogue between these national cultures and their 'others'. Thus it has been argued that you cannot know what it meant to be 'British' in the nineteenth century until you know what the British thought of Jamaica, their prize colony in the Caribbean, or Ireland, and more disconcertingly, *what the Jamaicans or the Irish thought of them ...* (C. Hall, 1994).

3 The third kind of explanation is anthropological, and you have already met it in **du Gay, Hall et al.** (1997). *The argument here is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture.* Mary Douglas, following the classic work on symbolic systems by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, and the later studies of mythology by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues that social groups impose meaning on their world by ordering and organizing things into classificatory systems (Douglas, 1966). Binary oppositions are crucial for all classification, because one must establish a clear difference between things in order to classify them. Faced with different kinds of food, Lévi-Strauss argued (1979), one way of giving them meaning is to start by dividing them into two groups – those which are eaten 'raw' and those eaten 'cooked'. Of course, you can also classify food into 'vegetables' and 'fruit'; or into those which are eaten as 'starters' and those which are eaten as 'desserts'; or those which are served up at dinner and those which are eaten at a sacred feast or the communion table. Here, again, 'difference' is fundamental to cultural meaning.

However, it can also give rise to negative feelings and practices. Mary Douglas argues that what really disturbs cultural order is when things turn up in the wrong category; or when things fail to fit any category – such as a substance like mercury, which is a metal but also a liquid, or a social group like mixed-race *mulattoes* who are neither 'white' nor 'black' but float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between (Stallybrass and White, 1986). Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is 'matter out of place' – the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes. Dirt in the garden is fine, but dirt in one's bedroom is 'matter out of place' – a sign of pollution, of symbolic boundaries being transgressed, of taboos broken. What we do with 'matter out of place' is to sweep it up, throw it out, restore the place to order, bring back the normal state of affairs. The retreat of many cultures towards 'closure' against foreigners, intruders, aliens and 'others' is part of the same process of purification (Kristeva, 1982).

According to this argument, then, *symbolic boundaries are central to all culture. Marking 'difference' leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes 'difference' powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order. Thus, 'what is socially peripheral is often symbolically centred'* (Babcock, 1978, p. 32).

4 The fourth kind of explanation is psychoanalytic and relates to the role of 'difference' in our psychic life. *The argument here is that the 'Other' is fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity.* According to Freud, the consolidation of our definitions of 'self' and of our sexual identities depends on the way we are formed as subjects, especially in relation to that stage of early development which he called the Oedipus complex (after the Oedipus story in Greek myth). A unified sense of oneself as a subject and one's sexual identity – Freud argued – are not fixed in the very young child. However, according to Freud's version of the Oedipus myth, at a certain point the boy develops an unconscious erotic attraction to the Mother, but finds the Father barring his way to 'satisfaction'. However, when he discovers that women do not have a penis, he assumes that his Mother was punished by castration, and that he might be punished in the same way if he persists with his unconscious desire. In fear, he switches his identification to his old 'rival', the Father, thereby taking on the beginnings of an identification with a masculine identity. The girl child identifies the opposite way – with the Father. But she cannot 'be' him, since she lacks the penis. She can only 'win' him by being willing, unconsciously, to bear a man's child – thereby taking up and identifying with the Mother's role, and 'becoming feminine'.

This model of how *sexual 'difference'* begins to be assumed in very young children has been strongly contested. Many people have questioned its speculative character. On the other hand, it has been very influential, as well as extensively amended by later analysts. The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1977), for example, went further than Freud, arguing that the child has no sense of itself as a subject separate from its mother until it sees itself in a mirror, or as if mirrored in the way it is looked at by the Mother. Through identification, 'it desires the object of her desire, thus focusing its libido on itself' (see Segal, 1997). It is this reflection from outside oneself, or what Lacan calls the 'look from the place of the other', during 'the mirror stage', which allows the child for the first time to recognize itself as a unified subject, relate to the outside world, to the 'Other', develop language and take on a sexual identity. (Lacan actually says, 'mis-recognize itself', since he believes the subject can never be fully unified.) Melanie Klein (1957), on the other hand, argued that the young child copes with this problem of a lack of a stable self by splitting its unconscious image of and identification with the Mother into its 'good' and 'bad' parts, internalizing some aspects, and projecting others on to the outside world. The common element in all these different versions of Freud is the role which is given by these different

theorists to the 'Other' in subjective development. Subjectivity can only arise and a sense of 'self' be formed through the symbolic and unconscious relations which the young child forges with a significant 'Other' which is outside – i.e. different from – itself.

At first sight, these psychoanalytic accounts seem to be positive in their implications for 'difference'. Our subjectivities, they argue, depend on our unconscious relations with significant others. However, there are also negative implications. The psychoanalytic perspective assumes that there is no such thing as a given, stable inner core to 'the self' or to identity. Psychically, we are never fully unified as subjects. Our subjectivities are formed through this troubled, never-completed, unconscious dialogue with – this internalization of – the 'Other'. It is formed in relation to something which completes us but which – since it lies outside us – we in some way always lack.

What's more, they say, this troubling split or division within subjectivity can never be fully healed. Some indeed see this as one of the main sources of neurosis in adults. Others see psychic problems arising from the splitting between the 'good' and 'bad' parts of the self – being pursued internally by the 'bad' aspects one has taken into oneself, or alternatively, projecting on to others the 'bad' feelings one cannot deal with. Frantz Fanon (referred to earlier), who used psychoanalytic theory in his explanation of racism, argued (1986/1952) that much racial stereotyping and violence arose from the refusal of the white 'Other' to give recognition 'from the place of the other', to the black person (see Bhabha, 1986b; Hall, 1996).

These debates about 'difference' and the 'Other' have been introduced because the chapter draws selectively on all of them in the course of analysing racial representation. It is not necessary at this stage for you to prefer one explanation of 'difference' over others, or to choose between them. They are not mutually exclusive since they refer to very different levels of analysis – the linguistic, the social, the cultural and the psychic levels respectively. However, there are two general points to note at this stage. First, from many different directions, and within many different disciplines, this question of 'difference' and 'otherness' has come to play an increasingly significant role. Secondly, 'difference' is **ambivalent**. It can be both positive and negative. It is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a sexed subject – and at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the 'Other'. In what follows, you should always bear in mind this ambivalent character of 'difference', its divided legacy.

ambivalence

## 2 Racializing the 'Other'

Holding these theoretical 'tools' of analysis in reserve for a moment, let us now explore further some examples of the repertoires of representation and representational practices which have been used to mark racial difference and signify the racialized 'Other' in western popular culture. How was this archive formed and what were its typical figures and practices?

There are three major moments when the 'West' encountered black people, giving rise to an avalanche of popular representations based on the marking of racial difference. The first began with the sixteenth-century contact between European traders and the West African kingdoms, which provided a source of black slaves for three centuries. Its effects were to be found in slavery and in the post-slave societies of the New World (discussed in section 2.2). The second was the European colonization of Africa and the 'scramble' between the European powers for the control of colonial territory, markets and raw materials in the period of 'high Imperialism' (see below, section 2.1). The third was the post-World War II migrations from the 'Third World' into Europe and North America (examples from this period are discussed in section 2.3). Western ideas about 'race' and images of racial difference were profoundly shaped by those three fateful encounters.

### 2.1 Commodity racism: empire and the domestic world

We start with how images of racial difference drawn from the imperial encounter flooded British popular culture at the end of the nineteenth century. In the middle ages, the European image of Africa was ambiguous – a mysterious place, but often viewed positively: after all, the Coptic Church was one of the oldest 'overseas' Christian communities; black saints appeared in medieval Christian iconography; and Ethiopia's legendary 'Prester John', was reputed to be one of Christianity's most loyal supporters. Gradually, however, this image changed. Africans were declared to be the descendants of Ham, cursed in *The Bible* to be in perpetuity 'a servant of servants unto his brethren'. Identified with Nature, they symbolized 'the primitive' in contrast with 'the civilized world'. The Enlightenment, which ranked societies along an evolutionary scale from 'barbarism' to 'civilization', thought Africa 'the parent of everything that is monstrous in Nature' (Edward Long, 1774, quoted in McClintock, 1995, p. 22). Curvier dubbed the Negro race a 'monkey tribe'. The philosopher Hegel declared that Africa was 'no historical part of the world ... it has no movement or development to exhibit'. By the nineteenth century, when the European exploration and colonization of the African interior began in earnest, Africa was regarded as 'marooned and historically abandoned ... a fetish land, inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors ...' (McClintock, 1995, p. 41).

The exploration and colonization of Africa produced an explosion of popular representations (Mackenzie, 1986). Our example here is the spread of imperial images and themes in Britain through commodity advertising in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

The progress of the great white explorer–adventurers and the encounters with the black African exotic was charted, recorded and depicted in maps and drawings, etchings and (especially) the new photography, in newspaper illustrations and accounts, diaries, travel writing, learned treatises, official reports and ‘boy’s-own’ adventure novels. Advertising was one means by which the imperial project was given visual form in a popular medium, forging the link between Empire and the domestic imagination. Anne McClintock argues that, through the racializing of advertisements (commodity racism), ‘the Victorian middle-class home became a space for the display of imperial spectacle and the reinvention of race, while the colonies – in particular Africa – became a theatre for exhibiting the Victorian cult of domesticity and the reinvention of gender’ (1995, p. 34).

Advertising for the objects, gadgets, gee-gaws and bric-a-brac with which the Victorian middle classes filled their homes provided an ‘imaginary way of relating to the real world’ of commodity production, and after 1890, with the rise of the popular press, from the *Illustrated London News* to the Harmsworth *Daily Mail*, the imagery of mass commodity production entered the world of the working classes via the spectacle of advertising (Richards, 1990). Richards calls it a ‘spectacle’ because advertising translated *things* into a fantasy visual display of *signs and symbols*. The production of commodities became linked to Empire – the search for markets and raw materials abroad supplanting other motives for imperial expansion.

This two-way traffic forged connections between imperialism and the domestic sphere, public and private. Commodities (and images of English domestic life) flowed outwards to the colonies; raw materials (and images of ‘the civilizing mission’ in progress) were brought into the home. Henry Stanley, the imperial adventurer, who famously traced Livingstone (‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’) in Central Africa in 1871, and was a founder of the infamous Congo Free State, tried to annex Uganda and open up the interior for the East Africa Company. He believed that the spread of commodities would make ‘civilization’ in Africa inevitable and named his native bearers after the branded goods they carried – Bryant and May, Remington and so on. His exploits became associated with Pears’ Soap, Bovril and various brands of tea. The gallery of imperial heroes and their masculine exploits in ‘Darkest Africa’ were immortalized on matchboxes, needle cases, toothpaste pots, pencil boxes, cigarette packets, board games, paperweights, sheet music. ‘Images of colonial conquest were stamped on soap boxes ... biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars ... No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace’ (McClintock, 1995, p. 209) (Figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8).





**FIGURE 4.8** Nineteenth-century advertisements for Pears' soap.

### ACTIVITY 7

Look, now, at the two advertisements for Pears' Soap (Figure 4.8). Before reading further, write down briefly what you think these ads are 'saying'.

### READING A

Now read Anne McClintock's analysis of Pears' advertising campaigns, in Reading A: 'Soap and commodity spectacle' at the end of this chapter.

## 2.2 Meanwhile, down on the plantation ...

Our second example is from the period of plantation slavery and its aftermath. It has been argued that, in the USA, a fully fledged racialized ideology did not appear amongst the slave-holding classes (and their supporters in Europe) until slavery was seriously challenged by the Abolitionists in the nineteenth century. Frederickson (1987) sums up the complex and sometimes contradictory set of beliefs about racial difference which took hold in this period:

Heavily emphasized was the historical case against the black man based on his supposed failure to develop a civilized way of life in Africa. As portrayed in pro-slavery writing, Africa was and always had been the scene of unmitigated savagery, cannibalism, devil worship, and licentiousness. Also advanced was an early form of biological argument, based on real or imagined physiological and anatomical differences – especially in cranial characteristics and facial angles – which allegedly explained mental and physical inferiority. Finally there was the appeal to deep-seated white fears of widespread miscegenation [sexual relations and interbreeding between the races], as pro-slavery theorists sought to deepen white anxieties by claiming that the abolition of slavery would lead to inter-marriage and the degeneracy of the race. Although all these arguments had appeared earlier in fugitive or embryonic form, there is something startling about the rapidity with which they were brought together and organized in a rigid polemical pattern, once the defenders of slavery found themselves in a propaganda war with the abolitionists.

(Frederickson, 1987, p. 49)

#### binary oppositions

This racialized discourse is structured by a set of **binary oppositions**. There is the powerful opposition between 'civilization' (white) and 'savagery' (black). There is the opposition between the biological or bodily characteristics of the 'black' and 'white' 'races', polarized into their extreme opposites – each the signifiers of an absolute difference between human 'types' or species. There are the rich distinctions which cluster around the supposed link, on the one hand, between the white 'races' and intellectual development – refinement, learning and knowledge, a belief in reason, the presence of developed institutions, formal government and law, and a 'civilized restraint' in their emotional, sexual and civil life, all of which are associated with 'Culture'; and on the other hand, the link between the black 'races' and whatever is instinctual – the open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of 'civilized refinement' in sexual and social life, a reliance on custom and ritual, and the lack of developed civil institutions, all of which are linked to 'Nature'. Finally there is the polarized opposition between racial 'purity' on the one hand, and the 'pollution' which comes from intermarriage, racial hybridity and interbreeding.

The Negro, it was argued, found happiness only when under the tutelage of a white master. His/her essential characteristics were fixed forever – 'eternally' – in Nature. Evidence from slave insurrections and the slave revolt in Haiti (1791) had persuaded whites of the instability of the Negro character. A degree of civilization, they thought, had rubbed off on the 'domesticated' slave, but underneath slaves remained by nature savage brutes; and long buried passions, once loosed, would result in 'the wild frenzy of revenge, and the savage lust for blood' (Frederickson, 1987, p. 54). This view was justified with reference to so-called scientific and ethnological 'evidence', the basis of a new kind of 'scientific racism'. Contrary to Biblical evidence, it was asserted, blacks/whites had been created at different times – according to the theory of 'polygenesis' (many creations).

Racial theory applied the **Culture/Nature** distinction differently to the two racialized groups. Among whites, 'Culture' was *opposed to* 'Nature'. Amongst blacks, it was assumed, 'Culture' *coincided with* 'Nature'. Whereas whites developed 'Culture' to subdue and overcome 'Nature', for blacks, 'Culture' and 'Nature' were interchangeable. David Green discussed this view in relation to anthropology and ethnology, the disciplines which (see Chapter 3) provided much of the 'scientific evidence' for it.

Though not immune to the 'white man's burden' [approach], anthropology was drawn through the course of the nineteenth century, even more towards causal connections between race and culture. As the position and status of the 'inferior' races became increasingly to be regarded as fixed, so socio-cultural differences came to be regarded as dependent upon hereditary characteristics. Since these were inaccessible to direct observation they had to be inferred from physical and behavioural traits which, in turn, they were intended to explain. Socio-cultural differences among human populations became subsumed within the identity of the individual human body. In the attempt to trace the line of determination between the biological and the social, the body became the totemic object, and its very visibility the evident articulation of nature and culture.

(Green, 1984, pp. 31–2)

Green's argument explains *why* the racialized body and its meanings came to have such resonance in popular representations of difference and 'otherness'. It also highlights the connection between *visual discourse* and *the production of (racialized) knowledge*. The body itself and its differences were visible for all to see, and thus provided 'the incontrovertible evidence' for a naturalization of racial difference. The representation of 'difference' through the body became the discursive site through which much of this 'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated.

### 2.3 Signifying racial 'difference'

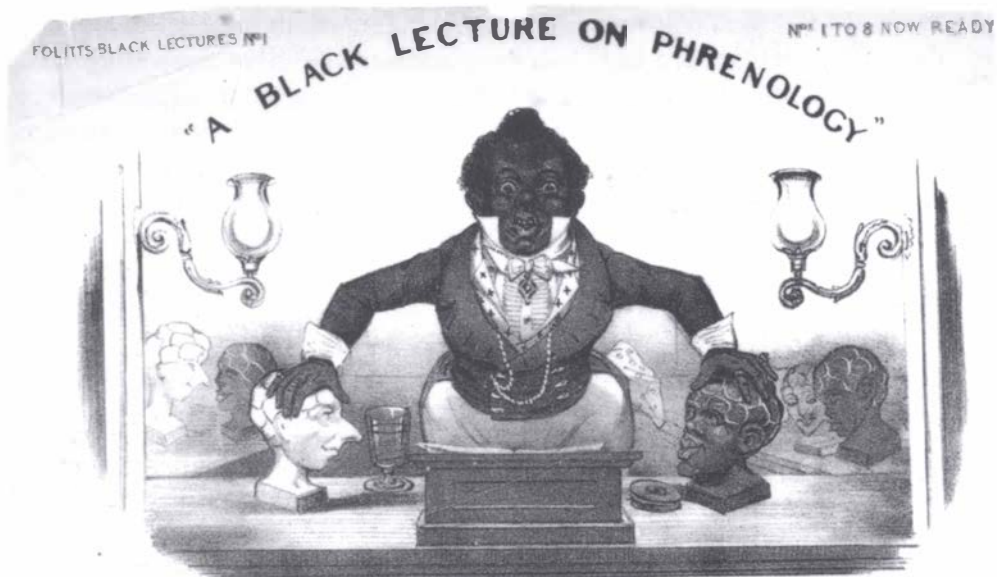
Popular representations of racial 'difference' during slavery tended to cluster around two main themes. First was the subordinate status and 'innate laziness' of blacks – 'naturally' born to, and fitted only for, servitude but, at the same time, stubbornly unwilling to labour in ways appropriate to their nature and profitable for their masters. Second was their innate 'primitivism', simplicity and lack of culture, which made them genetically incapable of 'civilized' refinements. Whites took inordinate amusement from the slaves' efforts to imitate the manners and customs of so-called 'civilized' white folks. (In fact, slaves often deliberately parodied their masters' behaviour by their exaggerated imitations, laughing at white folks behind their backs and 'sending them up'. The practice – called *signifying* – is now recognized as a well-established part of the black vernacular literary tradition. See, for example, Figure 4.9, reprinted in Gates, 1988).

## naturalization

Typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or *naturalizing* 'difference'. The logic behind **naturalization** is simple. If the differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification and change. But if they are 'natural' – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure'.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries popular representations of daily life under slavery, ownership and servitude are shown as so 'natural' that they require *no comment*. It was part of the natural order of things that white men should sit and slaves should stand; that white women rode and slave men ran after them shading them from the Louisiana sun with an umbrella; that white overseers should inspect slave women like prize animals, or punish runaway slaves with casual forms of torture (like branding them or urinating in their mouths), and that fugitives should kneel to receive their punishment (see Figures 4.10, 4.11, 4.12). These images are a form of ritualized degradation. On the other hand, some representations are idealized and sentimentalized rather than degraded, while remaining stereotypical. These are the 'noble savages' to the 'debased servants' of the previous type. For example, the endless representations of the 'good' Christian black slave, like Uncle Tom, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's pro-abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or the ever-faithful and devoted domestic slave, Mammy. A third group occupy an ambiguous middle-ground – tolerated though not admired. These include the 'happy natives' – black entertainers, minstrels and banjo-players who seemed not to have a brain in their head but sang, danced and cracked jokes all day long, to entertain white folks; or the 'tricksters' who were admired for their crafty ways of avoiding hard work, and their tall tales, like Uncle Remus.

For blacks, 'primitivism' (Culture) and 'blackness' (Nature) became interchangeable. This was their 'true nature' and they could not escape it. As has so often happened in the representation of women, their biology *was* their 'destiny'. Not only were blacks represented in terms of their essential characteristics. They were *reduced to their essence*. Laziness, simple fidelity, mindless 'cooning', trickery, childishness belonged to blacks *as a race, as a species*. There was nothing else to the kneeling slave *but* his servitude; nothing to Uncle Tom *except* his Christian forbearing; nothing to Mammy *but* her fidelity to the white household – and what Fanon called her 'sho' nuff good cooking'.



FRENS, AN FELLOW NIGGERS, LEND ME YOUR EARS.---

SHAKENSPEER.

"My Frens" you dissemble here dis nite for hear lectar on Nalagy—nalagy, my frens, is de art ob telling de fief niggars from de bones niggars, de fool niggars from de wisdom niggars, de grog niggars from de water niggars; an how dat done I wonder! eh! why I tell you, by de bumps on him "dam tick" skull—on dis side you may obserb I hab cast ob de head ob a genelman ob color, an on de oder side I hab cast ob de head ob a common white feller—berry well, here, my fren, I tink it rite to obserb, dat all great an clebber men ob ebery nation are BLACK; fuss der was Aggamemom an de Duke ob Wellington, lof black; one all ober, an de oder only black heart; den der was Nerec de fittler, Napoleon de butcher, and Crumwell de brewer, all berry black indeed; den der was Robispier, Marat, Billy Waters, "George de Forf," an de debil, all black; but de LAST genelman not so black as de rest. Dis you see, my frens, dat all great pipples are black; black-legs, black-hearts, and black-guards; and me furder wish to obserb dat in my humel obinion dat EBERY BODY was black once, ob course I lude to de DARK ages. An now for de subject: (as de doctor say to de body snatcher), he! he! he! Nalagy mean, my frens (if it mean any thing), bumps, and bumps mean nalagy, I tink dat berry clear. Dis is de head ob Cessar Antonia Pompey Agamemom—an dis de head ob a "dam white rascal." you see, my frens, dat clebber man an dam rascal is de same ting, when dey bof white; but when one white and de oder black "dat quite anoder pair ob shoes." Nalagy treats ob de head and is derfor a nonay study; de head is dewided into differen parts call "organs," (not wat dey grind about de street, kase de FRES do all girardin business demselves) der is great many organ in de head, but me can't say how many, kase when pipples get into row dey somtims get nock on de seense and dat break one organ in two or fere—so you see, my frens, dat de number ob organs is rader uncertin. When de flesh is off de head it called "skull," an where der is great mob ob seulls dey call it de "SCULLERY," an when two skulls bof alike it called "A SCULLER'S MATCH." Now, my frens, I shall splin de use ob de differen organs, firs me come to de organ ob smell, dis organ sometims called de smeller, an wat make pipples SMELL A RAT, it also called de sneezer, de snuff-box, an de conk (but dey only PROFESSIONAL names). I nex come to de organ ob sight, which make us see "sight ob tings" dis also called de "blinkers," de "goggles," de "peppers," &c. De organ ob "NUMBERS" is nex, and numbers bein in de skull is de reason dey call pipples "num-skull," dat short for number skull—besides

"Numbers mean figgars,  
And dam lot ob niggars."

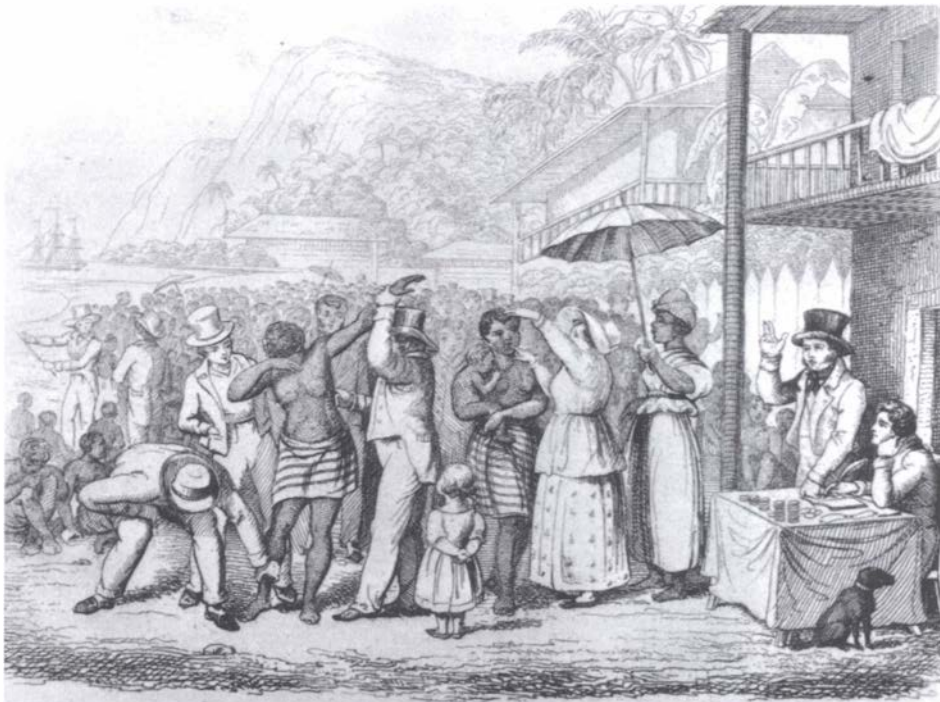
but ob all numbers nebber forget "number ONE," der is also de organ ob COLOR, but dis not to be found in BLACK pipples, kase black NO COLOR, nor in white kase dey hab no color; den der is de bump ob "BENEBOLENCE," which mean you no go away widout drop someting in de plate, dat collect actib beneboleence; but der is another call "PASSIB" beneboleence, which mean telling lies behind pipples back—kicking der cotis under de table, and pinching dem when nobody see you, dat called passib beneboleence; furder on me notice de organ ob "DRAWING," drawing, my frens, mean "drawing" water, drawing a truck, drawing teef, and sometims drawing it mild. Me now come to de organ ob "PERSPECTIB," perspectib make pipples see ting long way off (somtims out ob sight), some pipples grow bettar (in perspectib), pay der debts in perspectib, and me see large collection ob money dis nite (in perspectib). Nex is de organ ob "COMBATINNESS," an is de reason make niggars punch one an oders head, and when it berry large it called d—wolloped; me now come to de organ ob "CONKORD," dis is suppose by some pipples to mean music an harmony—no sich ting, "CONK"—and treats ob de conk, and eberybody NOSE dat's not music; me find also de organ ob "FORM," form mean "berry long stool," an it also mean de man ob color's head, dat's form wid a wengeance! Observe de smove an finely pencilled brow; de sof and languishing eye, de graceful outline ob de nose, de "delicately chissellips" forming altogether dat lubly expression de french call JENNY squeek aw, among de many organs der some me no uerstaund, one ob which is call "AMITIBNESS," but me spose Amitibness an "Costibness" is de same ting; me now come to de organ ob "TIME," time, my frens, "dam old rascal" he draw de face into wrinkles, and "deface it," he pull out black hair an shove in de grey; time also berry big fief, he rob us ob healf, ob strength an enjoyment, he pull down buildings, kills pipples an shub em into holes in de ground; he also great drunkard, kase he always hab a glass in him hand. Der is also anoder organ called "MEMORY," some pipples hab berry bad memory, me know some niggars when dey git new coat forget der frens; dat shocking bad memory—some forget der debts, acts ob kindness, an den forget dem selves, but me hope no one will forget de COLLECTION at de door. Der is anoder organ call "TRUFF," but ME NO NOTING ABOUT DAT, so me shall finis de lectar in de words ob de poet PUNCH, "hir ray de debil's dead, its all ober. Here, "Sunbo," you dan jigerry toe niggars look after de BROWNS kase de BLACKS are bolting,

LONDON: FOLEY'S "CITY REPOSITORY OF ARTS," SPORTING GALLERY AND CHIEF PICTURE FRAMM MANUFACTURERS  
42, FLEET STREET, CORNER OF BRISTOL PLACE.

FIGURE 4.9 'A Black Lecture on Phrenology'.



**FIGURE 4.10** Slavery: a scene from a planter's life in the West Indies.



**FIGURE 4.11** Slavery: a slave auction in the West Indies, c. 1830.



**FIGURE 4.12**  
Slavery: drawing  
of a Creole lady  
and black slave in  
the West Indies.



**FIGURE 4.13**  
A girl and her  
golliwog: an  
illustration by  
Lawson Wood,  
1927.

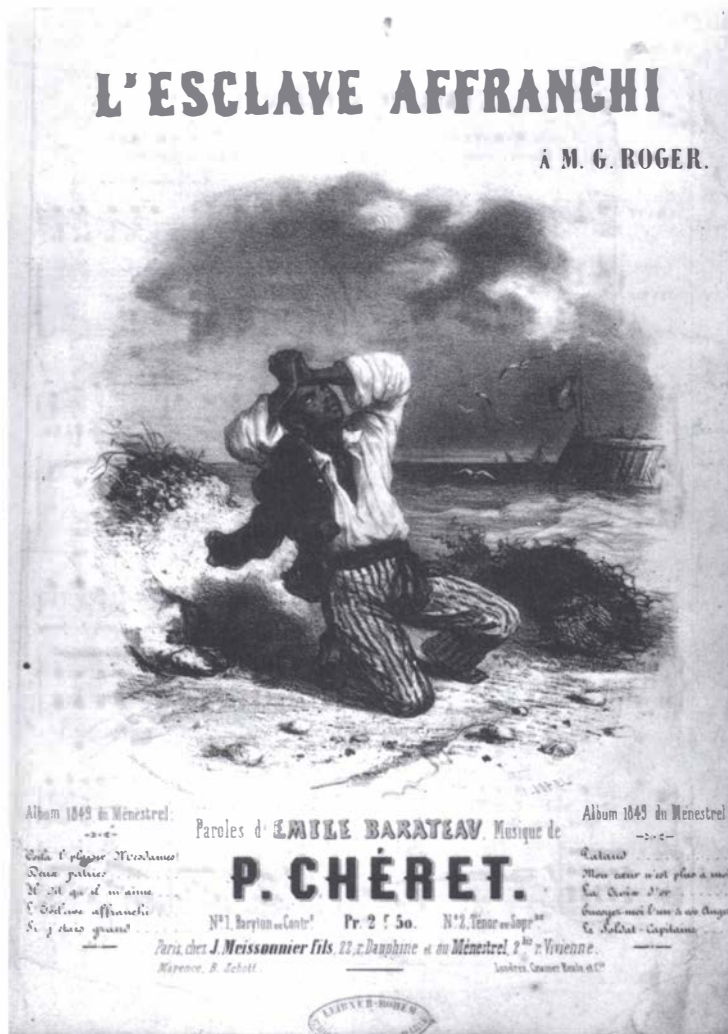
## stereotypes

In short, these are **stereotypes**. We will return, in section 4, to examine this concept of *stereotyping* more fully. But for the moment, we note that 'stereotyped' means 'reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics'. Stereotyping of blacks in popular representation was so common that cartoonists, illustrators and caricaturists could summon up a whole gallery of 'black types' with a few, simple, essentialized strokes of the pen. Black people were reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference – thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose, and so on. For example, that figure of fun who, as doll and marmalade emblem, has amused little children down the ages: the Golliwog (Figure 4.13). This is only one of the many popular figures which reduces black people to a few simplified, reductive and essentialized features. Every adorable little 'piccaninny' was immortalized for years by his grinning innocence on the covers of the *Little Black Sambo* books. Black waiters served a thousand cocktails on stage, screen and in magazine ads. Black Mammy's chubby countenance smiled away, a century after the abolition of slavery, on every packet of Aunt Jemima's Pancakes.

### 3 Staging racial 'difference': 'and the melody lingered on ...'

The traces of these racial stereotypes – what we may call a 'racialized regime of representation' – have persisted into the late twentieth century (Hall, 1981). Of course, they have always been contested. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the anti-slavery movement (which led to the abolition of British slavery in 1834) did put into early circulation an alternative imagery of black–white relations and this was taken up by the American abolitionists in the US in the period leading up to the Civil War. In opposition to the stereotypical representations of racialized difference, abolitionists adopted a different slogan about the black slave – 'Are you not a man and brother? Are you not a woman and a sister?' – emphasizing, not difference, but a common humanity. The anniversary coins minted by the anti-slavery societies represented this shift, though not without the marking of 'difference'. Black people are still seen as childish, simple and dependent, though capable of, and on their way to (after a paternalist apprenticeship), something more like equality with whites. They were represented as either supplicants for freedom or full of gratitude for being freed – and consequently still shown kneeling to their white benefactors (Figure 4.14).

This image reminds us that the 'Uncle Tom' of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was not only written to appeal to anti-slavery opinion but in the conviction that, 'with their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart – their childlike simplicity of affection and facility of forgiveness', blacks were, if anything, *more* fitted than their white counterparts to 'the highest form of the peculiarly Christian life' (Stowe, quoted in Frederickson, 1987, p. 111). This sentiment counters one set of stereotypes (their savagery) by substituting another (their



**FIGURE 4.14** Two images of slaves kneeling: (top) from the sheet music of a French song, and (bottom) the female version of the well-known emblem of the English Abolition Society.

eternal goodness). The extreme racialization of the imagery has been modified; but a sentimentalized version of the stereotyping remained active in the discourse of anti-slavery.

After the Civil War, some of the grosser forms of social and economic exploitation, physical and mental degradation associated with plantation slavery were replaced by a different system of racial segregation – legalized in the South, more informally maintained in the North. Did the old, stereotypical ‘regime of representation’, which had helped to construct the image of black people in the white imaginary, gradually disappear?



That would seem too optimistic. A good test case is the American cinema, *the* popular art form of the first half of the twentieth century, where one would expect to find a very different representational repertoire. However, in critical studies like Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade* (1976), Cripps' *Black Film as Genre* (1978), Patricia Morton's *Disfigured Images* (1991), and Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks: an interpretative history of blacks in American films* (1973), the astonishing persistence of the basic racial 'grammar of representation' is documented – of course, with many variations and modifications allowing for differences in time, medium and context.

Bogle's study identifies the five main *stereotypes* which, he argues, made the cross-over: *Toms* – the Good Negroes, always 'chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved and insulted, they keep the faith, ne'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-kind' (p. 6). *Coons* – the eye-popping piccanninnies, the slapstick entertainers, the spinners of tall tales, the 'no-account "niggers", those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures, good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language' (pp. 7–8). *The Tragic Mulatto* – the mixed-race woman, cruelly caught between 'a divided racial inheritance' (p. 9), beautiful, sexually attractive and often exotic, the prototype of the smouldering, sexy heroine, whose partly white blood makes her 'acceptable', even attractive, to white men, but whose indelible 'stain' of black blood condemns her to a tragic conclusion. *Mammies* – the prototypical house-servants, usually big, fat, bossy and cantankerous, with their good-for-nothing husbands sleeping it off at home, their utter devotion to the white household and their unquestioned subservience in their workplaces (p. 9). Finally, the *Bad Bucks* – physically big, strong, no-good, violent, renegades, 'on a rampage and full of black rage', 'over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh' (p. 10). There are many traces of this in contemporary images of black youth – for example, the 'mugger', the 'drug-baron', the 'yardie', the gansta-rap singer, the 'niggas with attitude' bands and more generally black urban youth 'on the rampage'.

The film which introduced these black 'types' to the cinema was one of the most extraordinary and influential movies of all times, D.W. Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on a popular novel, *The Clansman*, which had already put some of these racialized images into circulation. Griffiths, a 'founding father' of the cinema introduced many technical and cinematic innovations and virtually single-handedly constructed the 'grammar' of silent feature-film-making. Up to then,

American movies had been two- or three-reel affairs, shots running no longer than ten or fifteen minutes, crudely and casually filmed. But *Birth of a Nation* was rehearsed for six weeks, filmed in nine, later edited in three months, and finally released as a hundred-thousand dollar spectacle, twelve reels in length and over three hours in running time. It altered the entire course and concept of American movie-making,

developing the close-up, cross-cutting, rapid-fire editing, the iris, the split-screen shot and realistic and impressionistic lighting. Creating sequences and images yet to be seen, the film's magnitude and epic grandeur swept audiences off their feet.

(Bogle, 1987, p. 10)

More astonishingly, it not only marked the 'birth of the cinema', but it told the story of 'the birth of the American nation' – identifying the nation's salvation with the 'birth of the Ku Klux Klan', that secret band of white brothers with their white hoods and burning crosses, 'defenders of white womanhood, white honour and white glory', shown in the film putting the blacks to rout in a magnificent charge, who 'restore(d) to the South everything it has lost including its white supremacy' (p. 12), and who were subsequently responsible for defending white racism in the South by torching black homes, beating up black people and lynching black men.

There have been many twists and turns in the ways in which the black experience was represented in mainstream American cinema. But the repertoire of stereotypical figures drawn from 'slavery days' has never entirely disappeared – a fact you can appreciate even if you are not familiar with many of the examples quoted. For a time, film-makers like Oscar Mischeaux produced a 'segregated' cinema – black films exclusively for black audiences (see Gaines, 1993). In the 1930s black actors principally appeared in mainstream films in the subordinate roles of jesters, simpletons, faithful retainers and servants. Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson faithfully butlered and danced for the child star, Shirley Temple; Louise Beavers steadfastly and cheerfully cooked in a hundred white family-kitchens; while Hattie McDaniel (fat) and Butterfly McQueen (thin) 'mammied' to Scarlet O'Hara's every trick and infidelity in *Gone With The Wind* – a film all about 'race' which failed to mention it (Wallace, 1993). Stepin Fetchit (*step in* and *fetch it*) was made to roll his eyes, spread his dim-witted grin, shuffle his enormous feet and stammer his confused way through twenty-six films – the archetypal 'coon'; and when he retired, many followed in his footsteps. The 1940s was the era of the black musicals – *Cabin in the Sky*, *Stormy Weather*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Carmen Jones* – and black entertainers like Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, Ethel Waters, Pearl Bailey, including two famous, type-cast 'mulatto *femmes fatales*', Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. 'They didn't make me into a maid but they didn't make me anything else either. I became a butterfly pinned to a column singing away in Movieland', was Lena Horne's definitive judgement (quoted in Wallace, 1993, p. 265).

Not until the 1950s did films begin cautiously to broach the subject of 'race' as problem (*Home of the Brave*, *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, to mention a few titles) – though largely from a white liberal perspective. A key figure in these films was Sidney Poitier – an extremely talented black actor, whose roles cast him as a 'hero for an integrationist age'. Bogle argues that Poitier, the first black actor to be allowed 'star billing' in mainstream Hollywood films, 'fitted'



**FIGURE 4.15** Still from *Charlie McCarthy, Detective*.



**FIGURE 4.16** Ann Sheridan and Hattie McDaniel in *George Washington Slept Here*, 1942.



**FIGURE 4.17** Dorothy Dandridge, the 1950s definitive tragic mulatto, in *Island in the Sun*, 1957.

because he was cast so rigorously 'against the grain'. He was made to play on screen everything that the stereotyped black figure was *not*: 'educated and intelligent, he spoke proper English, dressed conservatively, and had the best of table manners. For the mass white audience, Sidney Poitier was a black man who met their standards. His characters were tame; never did they act impulsively; nor were they threats to the system. They were amenable and pliant. And finally they were non-funky, almost sexless and sterile. In short they were the perfect dream for white liberals anxious to have a coloured man in for lunch or dinner' (Bogle, 1973, pp. 175–6). Accordingly, in 1967, he actually starred in a film entitled *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*. Despite outstanding film performances (*The Defiant Ones*, *To Sir With Love*, *In the Heat of the Night*), 'There was nothing there', as one critic kindly put it, 'to feed the old but potent fear of the over-endowed Negro' (Cripps, 1978, p. 223).



**FIGURE 4.18** Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis, in *The Defiant Ones*, 1958.

### 3.1 Heavenly bodies

Did nobody transcend this regime of racialized representation in the American cinema in its heyday up to the 1960s? If anyone could have, that person was Paul Robeson, who was a major black star and performer in the arts between 1924 and 1945, achieving enormous popularity with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Richard Dyer, in his full-length study of Robeson in *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), observes that, ‘His image insisted on his blackness – musically, in his primary association with Negro folk music, especially spirituals; in the theatre and films, in the recurrence of Africa as a motif; and in general in the way his image is so bound up with the notions of racial character, the nature of black folks, the Negro essence, and so on. Yet he was a star equally popular with black and white audiences.’ Dyer asks, ‘How did the period permit black stardom? What were the qualities this black person could be taken to embody, that could catch on in a society where there had never been a black star of this magnitude?’ (pp. 67, 69). One answer is that in his performances on stage, theatre and screen, Robeson was ‘read’ differently by black and white audiences. ‘Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things – spontaneity, emotion, naturalness – yet giving them a different implication’ (ibid., p. 79).

Robeson’s is a complex case, shot through with ambivalences. Dyer identifies a number of themes through which Robeson came to embody ‘the epitome of what black people are like’ (ibid., p. 71). His musical talent, sonorous voice, his intellect, physical presence and stature, coupled with his simplicity, sincerity, charm and authority allowed him to portray the ‘male heroes of black culture’ in plays like *Toussaint L’Ouverture* and films like *The Emperor Jones* – but also ‘the stereotypes of the white imagination’ in *Show Boat*, *Shuffle Along*, *Voodoo* and *Sanders of the River* (ibid., p. 73) (Figure 4.19). Robeson himself said that ‘The white man has made a fetish of intellect and worships the God of thought; the Negro feels rather than thinks, experiences emotions directly rather than interprets them by roundabout and devious abstractions, and apprehends the outside world by means of intuitive perceptions ...’ (quoted in Dyer, 1986, p. 76). This sentiment, embodied in several of his films, gave his performances a vibrant emotional intensity. But it also played directly into the black/white, emotion/intellect, nature/culture binary oppositions of racial stereotyping.

Something of the same ambivalence can be detected in relation to other themes, Dyer argues, like the representation of blackness



**FIGURE 4.19** Paul Robeson in *Sanders of the River*, 1935.



**FIGURE 4.20**  
Paul Robeson  
with Wallace  
Ford and Henry  
Wilcoxon, at the  
Giza pyramids in  
Egypt, during the  
filming of *Jericho*,  
1937.

as 'folk' and what he calls 'atavism' (for a definition, see below). The emotional intensity and 'authenticity' of black performers was supposed to give them a genuine feel for the 'folk' traditions of black people – 'folk', here, signifying spontaneity and naturalness as opposed to the 'artificiality' of high art. Robeson's singing epitomized this quality, capturing what was thought to be the essence of the Negro spirituals in, for example, the universally popular and acclaimed song, *Old Man River*. He sang it in a deep, sonorous voice which, to blacks, expressed their long travail and their hope of freedom, but also, to whites, what they had always heard in spirituals and Robeson's voice – 'sorrowing, melancholy, suffering' (Dyer, 1986, p. 87). Robeson gradually altered the words of this song to make it more political – 'to bring out and extend its reference to oppression and to alter its meaning from resignation to struggle' (ibid., p. 105). The line which, in the stage performance of *Show Boat*, went 'Ah'm tired of livin' an' scared of dyin'" was altered in the film to the much more assertive 'I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'" (ibid., p. 107). On the other hand, Robeson sang black folk songs and spirituals in a 'pure' voice and 'educated' diction, without any of jazz's use of syncopation or delay in phrasing, without any of the 'dirty' notes of black blues, gospel and soul music or the nasal delivery characteristic of 'folk' or the call-and-response structure of African and slave chants.

By 'atavism', Dyer means a return to or 'recovery of qualities that have been carried in the blood from generation to generation ... It suggests raw, violent, chaotic and "primitive" emotions' and in the Robeson context, it was closely associated with Africa and the 'return' to 'what black people were supposed to be like deep down' and 'a guarantee of the authentic wildness within of the people who had come from there' (ibid., p. 89). Robeson's 'African' plays and films (*Sanders of the River*, *Song of Freedom*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Jericho*) were full of 'authentic' African touches, and he researched a great deal into the background of African culture. 'In practice, however,' Dyer observes, 'these are genuine notes inserted into works produced decidedly within American and British discourses on Africa' (ibid., p. 90).

#### ACTIVITY 8

Look, now, at the photograph of Robeson in a version of African dress (Figure 4.19), taken on the set of *Sanders of the River* (1935). Now, look at the second photograph (Figure 4.20) – Robeson with Wallace Ford and Henry Wilcoxon at the Giza pyramids. What strikes you about these photographs? Write down briefly anything which strikes you about the 'meaning' of these images.

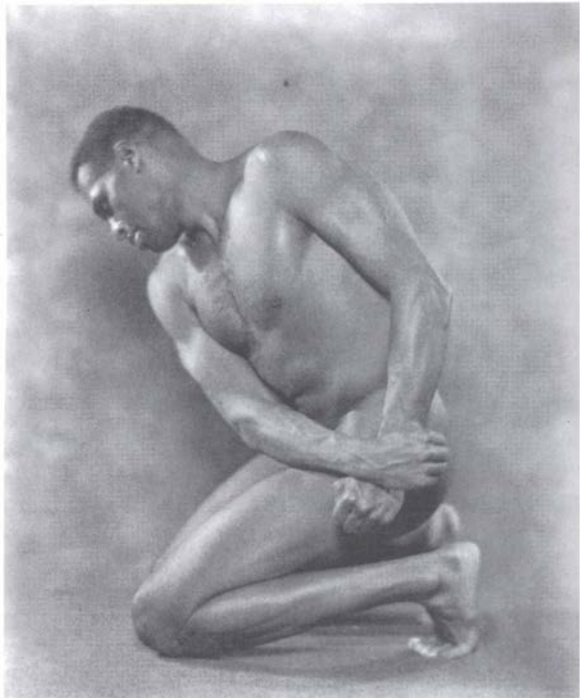
## READING B

Now read Richard Dyer's brief analysis of the second of these images (Reading B at the end of this chapter).

Undoubtedly, part of Robeson's immense impact lay in his commanding physical presence. 'His sheer size is emphasized time and again, as is the strength presumed to go with it' (Dyer, p. 134). One can perhaps judge the relevance of this to his representation of blackness from the nude study of Robeson taken by the photographer, Nicholas Muray, which, in Dyer's terms, combines Beauty and Strength with Passivity and Pathos.

## ACTIVITY 9

What do you think?



**FIGURE 4.21**  
Paul Robeson, by  
Nicholas Muray.

Even so outstanding a performer as Paul Robeson, then, could inflect, but could not entirely escape, the representational regime of racial difference which had passed into the mainstream cinema from an earlier era. A more independent representation of black people and black culture in the cinema would have to await the enormous shifts which accompanied the upheavals of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and the ending of legal segregation in the South, as well as the huge migration of blacks into the cities and urban centres of the North, which profoundly challenged the 'relations of representation' between racially defined groups in American society.

A second, more ambiguous, 'revolution' followed in the 1980s and 1990s, with the collapse of the 'integrationist' dream of the Civil Rights movement, the expansion of the black ghettos, the growth of the black 'underclass', with its endemic poverty, ill-health and criminalization, and the slide of some black communities into a culture of guns, drugs and intra-black violence. This has, however, been accompanied by the growth of an affirmative self-confidence in, and an insistence on 'respect' for, black cultural identity, as well as a growing 'black separatism' – which features nowhere so visibly as in the massive impact of black music (including 'black rap') on popular music and the visual presence of the music-affiliated 'street-style' scene. These developments have transformed the practices of racial representation, in part because the question of representation itself has become a critical arena of contestation and struggle. Black actors agitated for and got a wider variety of roles in film and television. 'Race' came to be acknowledged as one of the most significant themes of American life and times. In the 1980s and 1990s, blacks themselves entered the American cinema mainstream as independent film-makers, able – like Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*), Julie Dash (*Daughters*

*of the Dust*) or John Singleton (*Boys 'n' the Hood*) – to put their own interpretations on the way blacks figure within 'the American experience'. This has broadened the regime of racial representation – the result of a historic 'struggle around the image' – a politics of representation – whose strategies we need to examine more carefully.

## 4 Stereotyping as a signifying practice

Before we pursue this argument, however, we need to reflect further on how this racialized regime of representation actually works. Essentially, this involves examining more deeply the set of representational practices known as **stereotyping**. So far, we have considered the essentializing, reductionist and naturalizing effects of stereotyping. Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature. Here, we examine four further aspects: (a) the construction of 'otherness' and exclusion; (b) stereotyping and power; (c) the role of fantasy; and (d) fetishism.

Stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of racial difference. But what is a stereotype? How does it actually work? In his essay on 'Stereotyping', Richard Dyer (1977) makes an important distinction between *typing* and *stereotyping*. He argues that, without the use of *types*, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the world. We understand the world by referring individual objects, people or events in our heads to the general classificatory schemes into which – according to our culture – they fit. Thus we 'decode' a flat object on legs on which we place things as a 'table'. We may never have seen that kind of 'table' before, but we have a general concept or category of 'table' in our heads, into which we 'fit' the particular objects we perceive or encounter. In other words, we understand 'the particular' in terms of its 'type'. We deploy what Alfred Schutz called *typifications*. In this sense, 'typing' is essential to the production of meaning (an argument we made earlier in Chapter 1).

Richard Dyer argues that we are always 'making sense' of things in terms of some wider categories. Thus, for example, we come to 'know' something about a person by thinking of the *roles* which he or she performs: is he/she a parent, a child, a worker, a lover, boss, or an old age pensioner? We assign him/her to the *membership* of different groups, according to class, gender, age group, nationality, 'race', linguistic group, sexual preference and so on. We order him/her in terms of *personality type* – is he/she a happy, serious, depressed, scatter-brained, over-active kind of person? Our picture of who the person 'is' is built up out of the information we accumulate from positioning him/her within these different orders of typification. In broad terms, then, 'a *type* is any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or "development" is kept to a minimum' (Dyer, 1977, p. 28).

What, then, is the difference between a *type* and a *stereotype*? *Stereotypes* get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity. This is the process we described earlier. So the first point is – *stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*.

Secondly, *stereotyping deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’*. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. It then *excludes* or *expels* everything which does not fit, which is different. Dyer argues that ‘a system of social- and stereo-types refers to what is, as it were, within and beyond the pale of normalcy [i.e. behaviour which is accepted as ‘normal’ in any culture]. Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those who the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types. ... [B]oundaries ... must be clearly delineated and so stereotypes, one of the mechanisms of boundary maintenance, are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, unalterable’ (ibid., p. 29). So, *another feature of stereotyping is its practice of ‘closure’ and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong.*

Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Us and Them. It facilitates the ‘binding’ or bonding together of all of Us who are ‘normal’ into one ‘imagined community’; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – ‘the Others’ – who are in some way different – ‘beyond the pale’. Mary Douglas (1966), for example, argued that whatever is ‘out of place’ is considered as polluted, dangerous, taboo. Negative feelings cluster around it. It must be symbolically excluded if the ‘purity’ of the culture is to be restored. The feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva, calls such expelled or excluded groups, ‘abjected’ (from the Latin meaning, literally, ‘thrown out’) (Kristeva, 1982).

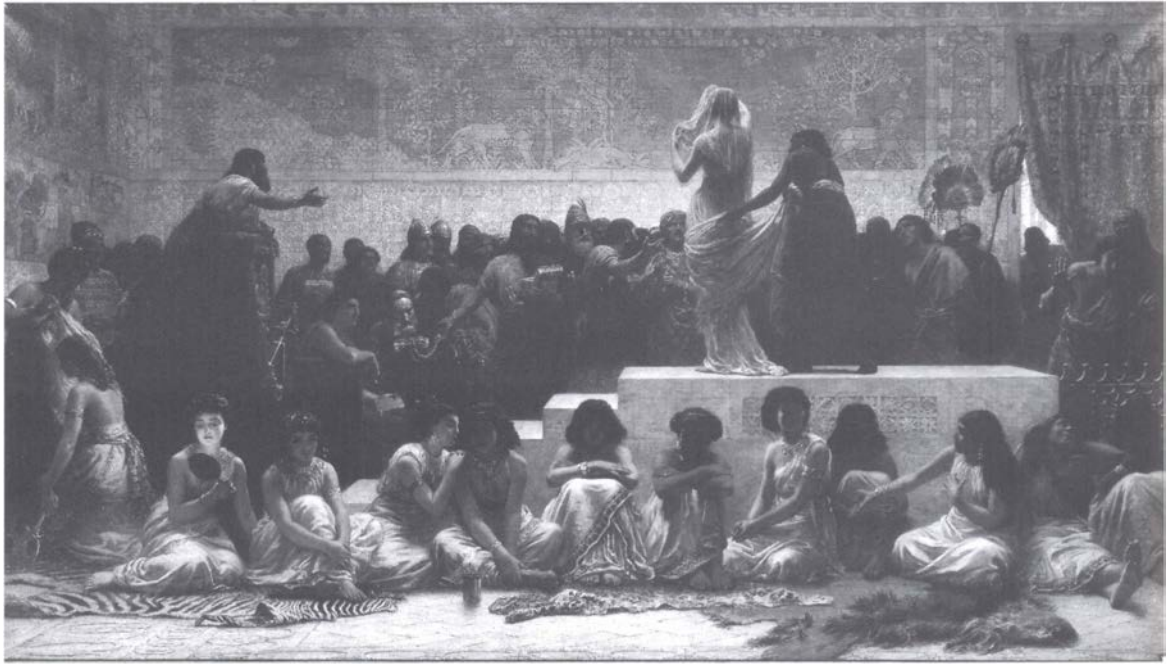
The third point is that *stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power*. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group. One aspect of this power, according to Dyer, is *ethnocentrism* – ‘the application of the norms of one’s own culture to that of others’ (Brown, 1965, p. 183). Again, remember Derrida’s argument that, between binary oppositions like Us/Them, ‘we are not dealing with ... peaceful coexistence ... but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs ... the other or has the upper hand’ (1972, p. 41).

In short, stereotyping is what Foucault called a 'power/knowledge' sort of game. It classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'. Interestingly, it is also what Gramsci would have called an aspect of the struggle for hegemony. As Dyer observes, 'The establishment of normalcy (i.e. what is accepted as 'normal') through social- and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups ... to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology. So right is this world view for the ruling groups that they make it appear (as it *does* appear to them) as 'natural' and 'inevitable' – and for everyone – and, in so far as they succeed, they establish their hegemony' (Dyer, 1977, p. 30). Hegemony is a form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once, so that its ascendancy commands widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable.

#### 4.1 Representation, difference and power

Within stereotyping, then, we have established a connection between representation, difference and power. However, we need to probe the nature of this *power* more fully. We often think of power in terms of direct physical coercion or constraint. However, we have also spoken, for example, of power *in representation*; power to mark, assign and classify; of *symbolic* power; of *ritualized* expulsion. Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain 'regime of representation'. It includes the exercise of *symbolic power* through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence.

In his study of how Europe constructed a stereotypical image of 'the Orient', Edward Said (1978) argues that, far from simply reflecting what the countries of the Near East were actually like, 'Orientalism' was the *discourse* 'by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'. Within the framework of western hegemony over the Orient, he says, there emerged a new object of knowledge – 'a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personalities, national or religious character' (pp. 7–8). This form of power is closely connected with knowledge, or with the practices of what Foucault called 'power/knowledge'.



**FIGURE 4.22** Edwin Long, *The Babylonian Marriage Market*, 1882.

#### ACTIVITY 10

For an example of Orientalism in visual representation, look at the reproduction of a very popular painting, *The Babylonian Marriage Market* by Edwin Long (Figure 4.22). Not only does the image produce a certain way of knowing the Orient – as ‘the mysterious, exotic and eroticized Orient’; but also, the women who are being ‘sold’ into marriage are arranged, right to left, in ascending order of ‘whiteness’. The final figure approximates most closely to the western ideal, the norm; her clear complexion accentuated by the light reflected on her face from a mirror.

Said’s discussion of Orientalism closely parallels Foucault’s power/knowledge argument: a *discourse* produces, through different practices of *representation* (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting, etc.), a form of *racialized knowledge of the Other* (Orientalism) deeply implicated in the operations of *power* (imperialism).

Interestingly, however, Said goes on to define ‘power’ in ways which emphasize the similarities between Foucault and Gramsci’s idea of *hegemony*:

In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result

of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism its durability and its strength ... Orientalism is never far from ... the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent thinker ... may have had different views on the matter.

(Said, 1978, p. 7)

You should also recall here our earlier discussion in Chapter 1, about introducing *power* into questions of representation. Power, we recognized there, always operates in conditions of unequal relations. Gramsci, of course, would have stressed 'between classes', whereas Foucault always refused to identify *any* specific subject or subject-group as the source of power, which, he said, operates at a local, tactical level. These are important differences between these two theorists of power.

However, there are also some important similarities. For Gramsci, as for Foucault, power also involves knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership and authority, as well as economic constraint and physical coercion. Both would have agreed that power cannot be captured by thinking exclusively in terms of force or coercion: power also seduces, solicits, induces, wins consent. It cannot be thought of in terms of one group having a monopoly of power, simply radiating power *downwards* on a subordinate group by an exercise of simple domination from above. It includes the dominant *and* the dominated within its circuits. As Homi Bhabha has remarked, apropos Said, 'it is difficult to conceive ... subjectification as a placing *within* Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too' (Bhabha, 1986a, p. 158). Power not only constrains and prevents: it is also productive. It produces new discourses, new kinds of knowledge (i.e. Orientalism), new objects of knowledge (the Orient), it shapes new practices (colonization) and institutions (colonial government). It operates at a micro-level – Foucault's 'micro-physics of power' – as well as in terms of wider strategies. And, for both theorists, power is to be found everywhere. As Foucault insists, power circulates.

The circularity of power is especially important in the context of representation. The argument is that everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is caught up, *though not on equal terms*, in power's circulation. No one – neither its apparent victims nor its agents – can stand wholly outside its field of operation (think, here, of the Paul Robeson example).

## 4.2 Power and fantasy

A good example of this ‘circularity’ of power relates to how black masculinity is represented within a racialized regime of representation. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien (1994) argue that the representation of black masculinity ‘has been forged in and through the histories of slavery, colonialism and imperialism’.

As sociologists like Robert Staples (1982) have argued, a central strand of the ‘racial’ power exercised by the white male slave master was the denial of certain masculine attributes to black male slaves, such as authority, familial responsibility and the ownership of property. Through such collective, historical experiences black men have adopted certain patriarchal values such as physical strength, sexual prowess and being in control as a means of survival against the repressive and violent system of subordination to which they have been subjected.

The incorporation of a code of ‘macho’ behaviour is thus intelligible as a means of recuperating some degree of power over the condition of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the white master subject. ... The prevailing stereotype (in contemporary Britain) projects an image of black male youth as ‘mugger’ or ‘rioter’ ... But this regime of representation is reproduced and maintained in hegemony because black men have had to resort to ‘toughness’ as a defensive response to the prior aggression and violence that characterizes the way black communities are policed ... This cycle between reality and representation makes the ideological fictions of racism empirically ‘true’ – or rather, there is a struggle over the definition, understanding and construction of meanings around black masculinity within the dominant regime of truth.

(Mercer and Julien, 1994, pp. 137–8)

During slavery, the white slave master often exercised his authority over the black male slave, by depriving him of all the attributes of responsibility, paternal and familial authority, treating him as a child. This ‘infantilization’ of difference is a common representational strategy for both men and women. (Women athletes are still widely referred to as ‘girls’. And it is only recently that many Southern US whites have ceased referring to grown black men as ‘Boy!’, while the practice still lingers in South Africa.) Infantilization can also be understood as a way of symbolically ‘castrating’ the black man (i.e. depriving him of his ‘masculinity’); and, as we have seen, whites often fantasized about the excessive sexual appetites and prowess of black men – as they did about the lascivious, over-sexed character of black women – *which they both feared and secretly envied*. Alleged rape was the principal ‘justification’ advanced for the lynching of black men in the Southern states until the Civil Rights Movement (Jordan, 1968). As Mercer observes, ‘The primal fantasy of the big black penis projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation, eugenic pollution and racial degeneration is acted out through white male

rituals of racial aggression – the historical lynching of black men in the United States routinely involved the literal castration of the Other's "strange fruit" (1994a, p. 185).

The outcomes were often violent. Yet the example also brings out the circularity of power and the *ambivalence* – the double-sided nature – of representation and stereotyping. For, as Staples, Mercer and Julien remind us, black men sometimes responded to this infantilization by adopting a sort of caricature-in-reverse of the hyper-masculinity and super-sexuality with which they had been stereotyped. Treated as 'childish', some blacks in reaction adopted a 'macho', aggressive–masculine style. But this only served to confirm the fantasy amongst whites of their ungovernable and excessive sexual nature (see Wallace, 1979). Thus, 'victims' can be trapped by the stereotype, unconsciously confirming it by the very terms in which they try to oppose and resist it.

This may seem paradoxical. But it does have its own 'logic'. This logic depends on representation working at two different levels at the same time: a conscious and overt level, and an unconscious or suppressed level. The former often serves as a displaced 'cover' for the latter. The conscious attitude amongst whites – that 'Blacks are not proper men, they are just simple children' – may be a 'cover', or a cover-up, for a deeper, more troubling fantasy – that 'Blacks are really super-men, better endowed than whites, and sexually insatiable'. It would be improper and 'racist' to express the latter sentiment openly; but the fantasy is present, and secretly subscribed to by many, all the same. Thus when blacks act 'macho', they seem to challenge the stereotype (that they are only children) – but in the process, they confirm the fantasy which lies behind or is the 'deep structure' of the stereotype (that they are aggressive, over-sexed and over-endowed). The problem is that blacks are trapped by the *binary structure* of the stereotype, which is split between two extreme opposites – and are obliged to *shuttle endlessly between them*, sometimes being represented as *both of them at the same time*. Thus blacks are both 'childlike' and 'oversexed', just as black youth are 'Sambo simpletons' and/or 'wily, dangerous savages'; and older men both 'barbarians' and/or 'noble savages' – Uncle Toms.

The important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real'. And, what is visually produced, by the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half – the deeper meaning – lies in *what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what is implied but cannot be shown*.

So far, we have been arguing that 'stereotyping' has its own *poetics* – its own ways of working – and its *politics* – the ways in which it is invested with power. We have also argued that this is a particular type of power – a *hegemonic* and *discursive* form of power, which operates as much through culture, the production of knowledge, imagery and representation, as through other means. Moreover, it is *circular*: it implicates the 'subjects' of power as well as those who are 'subjected to it'. But the introduction of the sexual

dimension takes us to another aspect of ‘stereotyping’: namely, its basis in *fantasy* and *projection* – and its effects of *splitting* and *ambivalence*.

In ‘Orientalism’, Said remarked that the ‘general idea about who or what was an “Oriental”’ emerged according to ‘a detailed logic governed’ – he insisted – ‘not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections’ (1978, p. 8). But where does this battery of ‘desires, repressions, investments and projections’ come from? What role does *fantasy* play in the practices and strategies of racialized representation? If the fantasies which lie behind racialized representations cannot be shown or allowed to ‘speak’, how do they find expression? How are they ‘represented’? This points us in the direction of the representational practice known as *fetishism*.

### 4.3 Fetishism and disavowal

Let us explore these questions of fantasy and fetishism, summing up the argument about representation and stereotyping, through a concrete example.

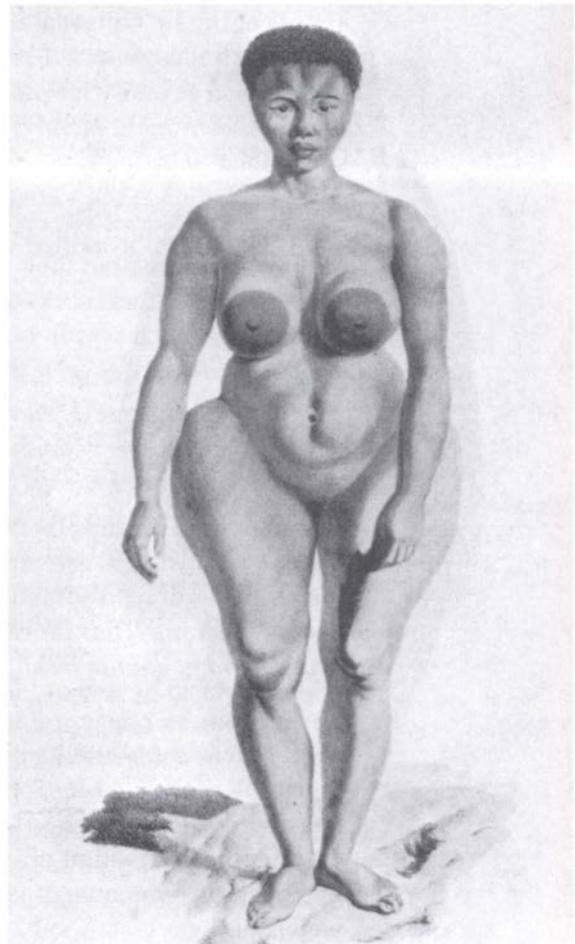
#### READING C

Read first the short edited extract on ‘The deep structure of stereotypes’ from *Difference and Pathology* by Sander Gilman (1985), Reading C at the end of this chapter.

Make sure you understand why, according to Gilman, stereotyping always involves what he calls (a) the splitting of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ object; and (b) the projection of anxiety on to the Other.

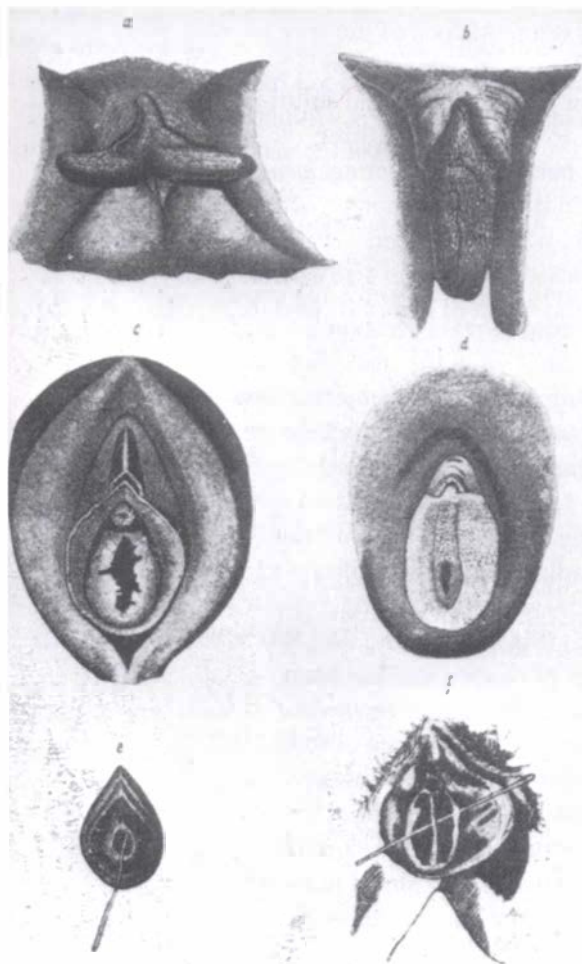
In a later essay, Gilman refers to the ‘case’ of the African woman, Saartje (or Sarah) Baartman, known as ‘The Hottentot Venus’, who was brought to England in 1819 by a Boer farmer from the Cape region of South Africa and a doctor on an African ship, and regularly exhibited over five years in London and Paris (Figure 4.23). In her early ‘performances’, she was produced on a raised stage like a wild beast, came and went from her cage when ordered, ‘more like a bear in a chain than a human being’ (quoted from *The Times*, 26 November 1810, in Lindfors, unpublished paper). She created a considerable public stir. She was subsequently baptized in Manchester, married an African and had two children,

**FIGURE 4.23**  
‘The Hottentot Venus’ – Saartje Baartman.



spoke Dutch and learned some English, and, during a court case in Chancery, taken out to protect her from exploitation, declared herself 'under no restraint' and 'happy to be in England'. She then reappeared in Paris where she had an amazing public impact, until her fatal illness from smallpox in 1815.

Both in London and Paris, she became famous in two quite different circles: amongst the general public as a popular 'spectacle', commemorated in ballads, cartoons, illustrations, in melodramas and newspaper reports; and amongst the naturalists and ethnologists, who measured, observed, drew, wrote learned treatises about, modelled, made waxen moulds and plaster casts, and scrutinized every detail, of her anatomy, dead and alive (Figure 4.24). What attracted both audiences to her was not only her size (she was a diminutive four feet six inches tall) but her *steatopygia* – her protruding buttocks, a feature of Hottentot anatomy – and what was described as her 'Hottentot apron', an enlargement of the labia 'caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and considered beautiful by the Hottentots and Bushmen' (Gilman, 1985, p. 85). As someone crudely remarked, 'she could be said to carry her fortune behind her, for London may never before have seen such a "heavy-arsed heathen"' (quoted in Lindfors, *ibid.*, p. 2).



I want to pick out several points from 'The Hottentot Venus' example in relation to questions of stereotyping, fantasy and fetishism.

First, note the preoccupation – one could say the obsession – with marking 'difference'. Saartje Baartman became the embodiment of 'difference'. What's more, her difference was 'pathologized': represented as a pathological form of 'otherness'. Symbolically, she did not fit the ethnocentric norm which was applied to European women and, falling outside a western classificatory system of what 'women' are like, she had to be constructed as 'Other'.

Next, observe her reduction to Nature, the signifier of which was her *body*. Her body was 'read', like a text, for the living evidence – the proof, the Truth – which it provided of her absolute 'otherness' and therefore of an irreversible difference between the 'races'.

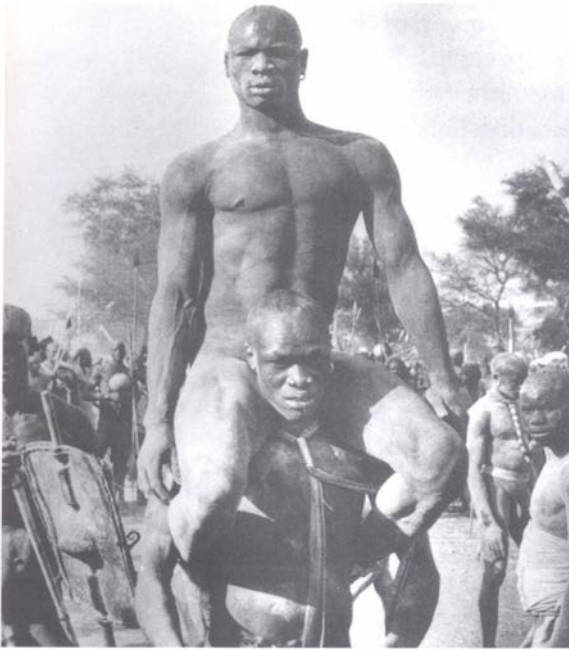
**FIGURE 4.24** ... 'every detail of her anatomy': Sexual anomalies in women, from Cesare Lombroso and Guillaume Ferraro, *La donna delinquente: la prostituta e la donna normale* (Turin, L. Roux, 1893).

Further, she became 'known', represented and observed through a series of polarized, binary oppositions. 'Primitive', not 'civilized', she was assimilated to the Natural order – and therefore compared with wild beasts, like the ape or the orangutan – rather than to the Human Culture. This naturalization of difference was signified, above all, by her sexuality. She was reduced to her body and her body in turn was reduced to her sexual organs. They stood as the essential signifiers of her place in the universal scheme of things. In her, Nature and Culture coincided, and could therefore be substituted for one another, read off against one another. What was seen as her 'primitive' sexual genitalia signified her 'primitive' sexual appetite, and vice versa.

Next, she was subjected to an extreme form of reductionism – a strategy often applied to the representation of women's bodies, of whatever 'race', especially in pornography. The 'bits' of her that were preserved served, in an essentializing and reductionist manner, as 'a pathological summary of the entire individual' (Gilman, 1985, p. 88). In the models and casts of them which were preserved in the Musée De L'Homme, she was literally turned into a set of separate objects, into a thing – 'a collection of sexual parts'. She underwent a kind of symbolic dismantling or *fragmentation* – another technique familiar from both male and female pornography. We are reminded here of Frantz Fanon's description in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of the way he felt disintegrated, as a black man, by the look of the white person: 'the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self' (1986, p. 109). Saartje Baartman did not exist as 'a person'. She had been disassembled into her relevant parts. She was 'fetishized' – turned into an object. This substitution of a *part* for the *whole*, of a *thing* – an object, an organ, a portion of the body – for a *subject*, is the effect of a very important representational practice – *fetishism*.

**Fetishism** takes us into the realm where fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen, in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown. *Fetishism* involves the substitution of an 'object' for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force. In anthropology, it refers to the way the powerful and dangerous spirit of a god can be displaced on to an object – a feather, a piece of stick, even a communion wafer – which then becomes charged with the spiritual power of that for which it is a substitute. In Marx's notion of 'commodity fetishism', the living labour of the worker has been displaced and disappears into things – the commodities which workers produce but have to buy back as though they belonged to someone else. In psychoanalysis, 'fetishism' is described as the substitute for the 'absent' phallus – as when the sexual drive becomes displaced to some other part of the body. The substitute then becomes eroticized, invested with the sexual energy, power and desire which cannot find expression in the object to which it is really directed. *Fetishism* in representation borrows from all these

fetishism



**FIGURE 4.25** Nuba wrestlers, by George Rodger.

Gilman (1985) describes a similar example of racial fetishism in the 'The Hottentot Venus'. Here the sexual object of the onlookers' gaze was *displaced* from her genitalia, which is what really obsessed them, to her buttocks. 'Female sexuality is tied to the image of the buttocks and the quintessential buttocks are those of the Hottentot' (p. 91).

#### disavowal

Fetishism, as we have said, involves **disavowal**. Disavowal is the strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*. It is where what has been tabooed nevertheless manages to find a displaced form of representation. As Homi Bhabha observes, 'It is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division' (1986a, p. 168). Freud, in his remarkable essay on 'Fetishism', wrote:

...the fetish is the substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up. ... It is not true that the [male] child ... has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained the belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached ... Yes, in his mind the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but the penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute ...

(1977/1927, p. 353)

meanings. It also involves *displacement*. The phallus cannot be represented because it is forbidden, taboo. The sexual energy, desire and danger, all of which are emotions powerfully associated with the phallus, are transferred to another part of the body or another object, which substitutes for it.

An excellent example of this trope is the photograph of the two Nubian wrestlers from a book of photographs by the English documentarist, George Rodger (Figure 4.25). This image was appended in homage to the back cover of her book, *The Last of the Nuba* (1976) by Leni Riefenstahl, the former Nazi film-maker whose reputation was built upon the films she made of Hitler's 1934 Nuremberg rally (*Triumph of the Will*) and the 1936 Berlin Olympics (*Olympiad*).

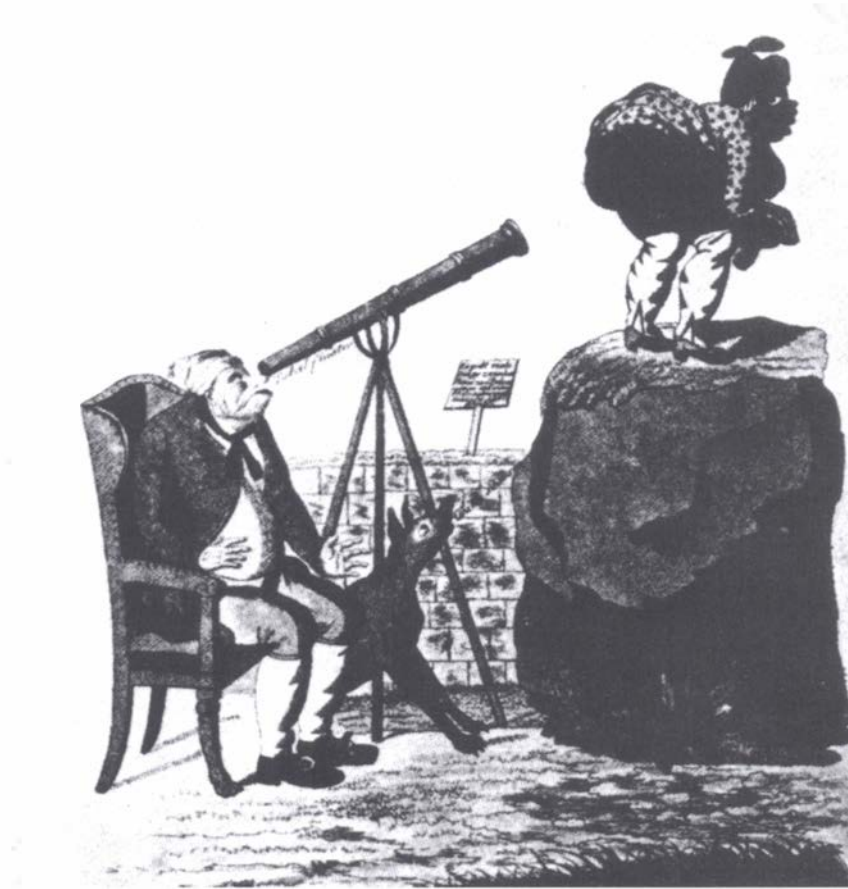
(We should note, incidentally, that Freud's tracing of the origin of fetishism back to the castration anxiety of the male child gives this trope the indelible stamp of a male-centred fantasy. The failure of Freud and much of later psychoanalysis to theorize female fetishism has been the subject of extended recent critique (see *inter alia*, McClintock, 1995).)

So, following the general logic of fetishism as a representational strategy, we could say of the Nubian wrestler, 'Though it is forbidden, I *can* look at the wrestler's genitals because they are no longer as they were. Their place has been taken by the head of his wrestling companion.' Thus, of Leni Riefenstahl's use of the Rodger photograph of the Nuba wrestlers, Kobena Mercer observes that 'Riefenstahl admits that her fascination with this East African people did not originate from an interest in their "culture" but from a photograph of two Nubian wrestlers by ... George Rodger ... In this sense her anthropological alibi for an ethnographic voyeurism is nothing more than the secondary elaboration, and rationalization, of the primal wish to see this lost image again and again' (1994a, p. 187).

Fetishism, then, is a strategy for having-it-both-ways: for both representing and not-representing the tabooed, dangerous or forbidden object of pleasure and desire. It provides us with what Mercer calls an 'alibi', what earlier we called a 'cover' or a 'cover-story'. We have seen how, in the case of 'The Hottentot Venus', not only is the gaze displaced from the genitalia to the buttocks; but also, this allows the observers to *go on looking* while disavowing the sexual nature of their gaze. Ethnology, science, the search for anatomical evidence here play the role as the 'cover', the disavowal, which allows the illicit desire to operate. It allows a double focus to be maintained – looking and not looking – an ambivalent desire to be satisfied. What is declared to be different, hideous, 'primitive', deformed, is at the same time being obsessively enjoyed and lingered over *because* it is strange, 'different', exotic. The scientists can look at, examine and observe Saartje Baartman naked and in public, classify and dissect every detail of her anatomy, on the perfectly acceptable alibi that 'it is all being done in the name of Science, of objective knowledge, ethnological evidence, in the pursuit of Truth'. This is what Foucault meant by knowledge and power creating a 'regime of truth'.

So, finally, fetishism licenses an unregulated *voyeurism*. Few could argue that the 'gaze' of the (largely male) onlookers who observed 'The Hottentot Venus' was disinterested. As Freud (1977/1927) argued, there is often a sexual element in 'looking', an eroticization of the gaze (an argument developed in Chapter 5). Looking is often driven by an unacknowledged search for illicit pleasure and a desire which cannot be fulfilled. 'Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused' (*ibid.*, p. 96). We go on looking, even if there is nothing more to see. He called the obsessive force of this pleasure in looking, 'scopophilia'. It becomes perverse, Freud argued, only 'if restricted exclusively to the genitals, connected with the over-riding of disgust ... or if, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplants it' (*ibid.*, p. 80).

Thus voyeurism is perfectly captured in the German caricature of the white gentleman observing 'The Hottentot Venus' through his telescope (Figure 4.26). He can look forever without being seen. But, as Gilman observes, look forever as he may, he 'can see nothing but her buttocks' (p. 91).



**FIGURE 4.26** German caricature of man viewing the Hottentot Venus through a telescope, early nineteenth century.

## 5 Contesting a racialized regime of representation

So far we have analysed some examples from the archive of racialized representation in western popular culture of different periods (sections 1, 2 and 3), and explored the representational practices of difference and 'otherness' (especially section 4). It is time to turn to the final set of questions posed in our opening pages. Can a dominant regime of representation be challenged, contested or changed? What are the counter-strategies which can begin to subvert the representation process? Can 'negative' ways of

representing racial difference, which abound in our examples, be reversed by a 'positive' strategy? What effective strategies are there? And what are their theoretical underpinnings?

Let me remind you that, theoretically, the argument which enables us to pose this question at all is the proposition (which we have discussed in several places and in many different ways) that *meaning can never be finally fixed*. If meaning could be fixed by representation, then there would be no change – and so no counter-strategies or interventions. Of course, we *do* make strenuous efforts to fix meaning – that is precisely what the strategies of stereotyping are aspiring to do, often with considerable success, for a time. But ultimately, meaning begins to slip and slide; it begins to drift, or be wrenched, or inflected into new directions. New meanings are grafted on to old ones. Words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control, and these marginal or submerged meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said. That is why we referred you to the work of Bakhtin and Volosinov in section 1.2. For they have given a powerful impetus to the practice of what has come to be known as **trans-coding**: taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings (e.g. 'Black is Beautiful').

trans-coding

A number of different *trans-coding* strategies have been adopted since the 1960s, when questions of representation and power acquired a centrality in the politics of anti-racist and other social movements. We only have space here to consider three of them.

## 5.1 Reversing the stereotypes

In the discussion of racial stereotyping in the American cinema, we discussed the ambiguous position of Sidney Poitier and talked about an *integrationist* strategy in US film-making in the 1950s. This strategy, as we said, carried heavy costs. Blacks could gain entry to the mainstream – but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks and behaviour. Following the Civil Rights movement, in the 1960s and 70s, there was a much more aggressive affirmation of black cultural identity, a positive attitude towards difference and a struggle over representation.

The first fruit of this counter-revolution was a series of films, beginning with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song* (Martin Van Peebles, 1971), and Gordon Parks' box-office success, *Shaft*. In *Sweet Sweetback*, Van Peebles values positively all the characteristics which would normally have been negative stereotypes. He made his black hero a professional stud, who successfully evades the police with the help of a succession of black ghetto low-lifers, sets fire to a police car, shafts another with a pool cue, lights out for the Mexican border, making full use of his sexual prowess at every opportunity, and ultimately gets away with it all, to a message scrawled across the screen: 'A BAADASSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES'. *Shaft*

was about a black detective, close to the streets but struggling with the black underworld and a band of black militants as well as the Mafia, who rescues a black racketeer's daughter. What marked *Shaft* out, however, was the detective's absolute lack of deference towards whites. Living in a smart apartment, beautifully turned out in casual but expensive clothes, he was presented in the advertising publicity as a 'lone black Super-spade – a man of flair and flamboyance who has fun at the expense of the white establishment'. He was 'a violent man who lived a violent life, in pursuit of black women, white sex, quick money, easy success, cheap "pot" and other pleasures' (Cripps, 1978, pp. 251–4). When asked by a policeman where he is going, Shaft replies, 'I'm going to get laid. Where are you going?' The instant success of *Shaft* was followed by a succession of films in the same mould, including *Superfly*, also by Parks, in which Priest, a young black cocaine dealer, succeeds in making one last big deal before retirement, survives both a series of violent episodes and vivid sexual encounters to drive off at the end in his Rolls Royce, a rich and happy man. There have been many later films in the same mould (e.g. *New Jack City*) with, at their centre (as the Rap singers would say), 'bad-ass black men, with attitude'.

We can see at once the appeal of these films, especially, though not exclusively, to black audiences. In the ways their heroes deal with whites, there is a remarkable absence, indeed a conscious reversal of, the old deference or childlike dependency. In many ways, these are 'revenge' films – audiences relishing the black heroes' triumphs over 'Whitey', loving the fact that they're getting away with it! What we may call the moral playing-field is levelled. Blacks are neither always worse nor always better than whites. They come in the usual human shapes – good, bad and indifferent. They are no different from the ordinary (white) average American in their tastes, styles, behaviour, morals, motivations. In class terms, they can be as 'cool', affluent and well groomed as their white counterparts. And their 'locations' are the familiar real-life settings of ghetto, street, police station and drug-bust.

At a more complex level, they placed blacks for the first time at the centre of the popular cinematic genres – crime and action films – and thus made them essential to what we may call the 'mythic' life and culture of the American cinema – more important, perhaps, in the end, than their 'realism'. For this is where the collective fantasies of popular life are worked out, and the exclusion of blacks from its confines made them precisely, peculiar, different, placed them 'outside the picture'. It deprived them of the celebrity status, heroic charisma, the glamour and pleasure of identification accorded to the white heroes of *film noir*, the old private eye, crime and police thrillers, the 'romances' of urban low-life and the ghetto. With these films, blacks had arrived in the cultural mainstream – with a vengeance!

These films carried through one counter-strategy with considerable single-mindedness – reversing the evaluation of popular stereotypes. And they proved that this strategy could secure box-office success and audience identification. Black audiences loved them because they cast black actors in glamorous and 'heroic' as well as 'bad' roles; white audiences took to them

because they contained all the elements of the popular cinematic genres. Nevertheless, among some critics, the judgement on their success as a representational counter-strategy has become more mixed. They have come to be seen by many as ‘blaxploitation’ films.

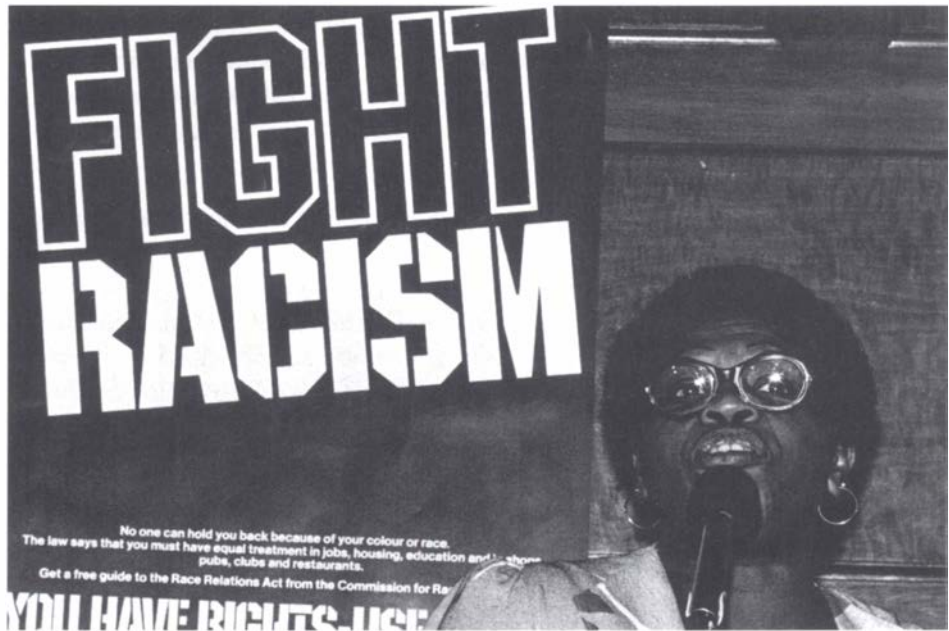
### ACTIVITY 11

Can you hazard a guess as to why they have come to be seen in this way?

To reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme (blacks are poor, childish, subservient, always shown as servants, everlastingly ‘good’, in menial positions, deferential to whites, never the heroes, cut out of the glamour, the pleasure, and the rewards, sexual and financial) may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical ‘other’ (blacks are motivated by money, love bossing white people around, perpetrate violence and crime as effectively as the next person, are ‘bad’, walk off with the goodies, indulge in drugs, crime and promiscuous sex, come on like ‘Superspades’ and *always get away with it!*). This may be an advance on the former list, and is certainly a welcome change. But it has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure of racial stereotyping and it has not unlocked what Mercer and Julien call ‘the complex dialectics of power and subordination’ through which ‘black male identities have been historically and culturally constructed’ (1994, p. 137). The black critic, Lerone Bennett acknowledged that ‘after it [*Sweet Sweetback* ...] we can never again see black people in films (noble, suffering, losing) in the same way ...’ But he also thought it ‘neither revolutionary nor black’, indeed, a revival of certain ‘antiquated white stereotypes’, even ‘mischievous and reactionary’. As he remarked, ‘nobody ever fucked his way to freedom’ (quoted in Cripps, 1978, p. 248). This is a critique which has, in retrospect, been delivered about the whole foregrounding of black masculinity during the Civil Rights movement, of which these films were undoubtedly a by-product. Black feminist critics have pointed out how the black resistance to white patriarchal power during the 1960s was often accompanied by the adoption of an exaggerated ‘black male macho’ style and sexual aggressiveness by black leaders towards black women (Michele Wallace, 1979; Angela Davis, 1983; bell hooks, 1992).

## 5.2 Positive and negative images

The second strategy for contesting the racialized regime of representation is the attempt to substitute a range of ‘positive’ images of black people, black life and culture for the ‘negative’ imagery which continues to dominate popular representation. This approach has the advantage of righting the balance. It is underpinned by an acceptance – indeed, a celebration – of difference. It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively: ‘Black is Beautiful’. It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected. It greatly expands the *range* of racial representations and the *complexity* of what it



**FIGURE 4.27**  
Photograph by  
David A. Bailey.

means to 'be black', thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes. Much of the work of contemporary black artists and visual practitioners fall into this category. In the photographs specially taken to illustrate David

Bailey's critique of 'positive images' in 'Rethinking black representation' (1988), we see black men looking after children and black women politically organizing in public – giving the conventional meaning of these images a different inflection.



Underlying this approach is an acknowledgement and celebration of diversity and difference in the world. Another kind of example is the 'United Colours of Benneton' advertising series, which uses ethnic models, especially children, from many cultures and celebrates images of racial and ethnic hybridity. But here, again, critical reception has been mixed (Bailey, 1988). Do these images evade the difficult questions, dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a liberal mish-mash of 'difference'? Do these images *appropriate* 'difference' into a spectacle in order to sell a product? Or are they genuinely a political statement about the necessity for everyone to accept and 'live with' difference,

**FIGURE 4.28** Photograph by David A. Bailey.

in an increasingly diverse, culturally pluralist world? Sonali Fernando (1992) suggests that this imagery ‘cuts both ways: on the one hand suggesting a problematizing of racial identity as a complex dialectic of similarities as well as differences, but on the other ... homogenizing all non-white cultures as other.’

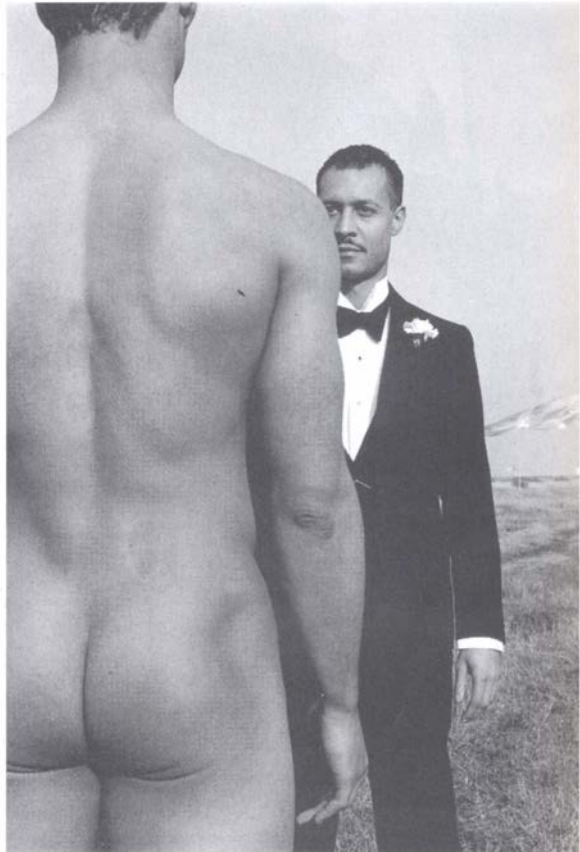
The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which ‘being black’ is represented, but does not *necessarily* displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries – but it does not undermine them. The peace-loving, child-caring Rastafarian can still appear, in the following day’s newspaper, as an exotic and violent black stereotype ...

### 5.3 Through the eye of representation

The third counter-strategy locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*. It is more concerned with the *forms* of racial representation than with introducing a new *content*. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories.

Thus, instead of avoiding the black body, because it has been so caught up in the complexities of power and subordination within representation, this strategy positively takes the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves. Instead of avoiding the dangerous terrain opened up by the interweaving of ‘race’, gender and sexuality, it deliberately contests the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by *working on* black sexuality. Since black people have so often been fixed, stereotypically, by the racialized gaze, it may have been tempting to refuse the complex emotions associated with ‘looking’. However, this strategy makes elaborate play with ‘looking’, hoping by its very attention, to ‘make it strange’ – that is, to de-familiarize it, and so make explicit what is often hidden – its erotic dimensions (Figure 4.29). It is not afraid to deploy humour – for

**FIGURE 4.29**  
Still from Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, 1989.



example, the comedian, Lenny Henry, forces us by the witty exaggerations of his Afro-Caribbean caricatures, to laugh *with* rather than *at* his characters. Finally, instead of refusing the displaced power and danger of 'fetishism', this strategy attempts to use the desires and ambivalences which tropes of fetishism inevitably awaken.

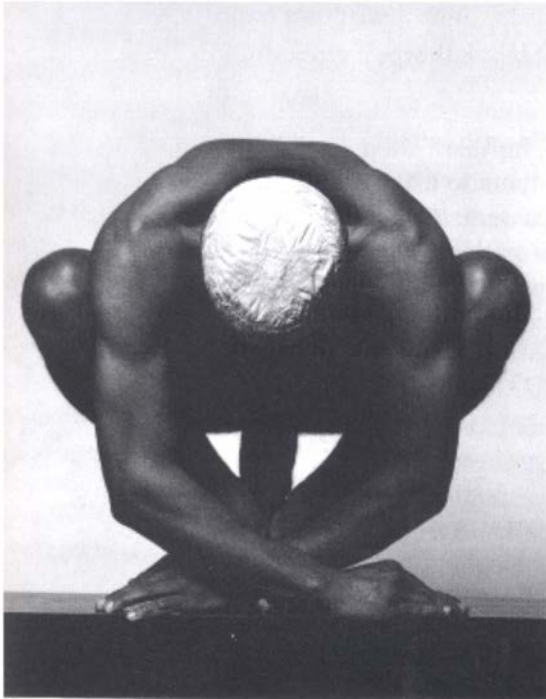
#### ACTIVITY 12

Look first at Figure 4.30.

It is by Robert Mapplethorpe, a famous gay, white, American photographer, whose technically brilliant studies of black nude male models have *sometimes* been accused of fetishism and of fragmenting the black body, in order to appropriate it symbolically for his personal pleasure and desire.

Now look at Figure 4.31. It is by the gay, black, Yoruba photographer, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who trained in the US and practised in London until his premature death, and whose images consciously deploy the tropes of fetishism, as well as using African and modernist motifs.

- 1 How far do these images, in your view, bear out the above comments about each photographer?
- 2 Do they use the tropes of representation in the same way?
- 3 Is their effect on the viewer – on the way you 'read' the images – the same? If not, what is the difference?



**FIGURE 4.30** *Jimmy Freeman*, 1981, by Robert Mapplethorpe (Copyright © 1981 The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe).



**FIGURE 4.31** *Sonponnol*, 1987, by Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

## READING D

Now read the brief extract from Kobena Mercer's essay 'Reading racial fetishism' (1994), in which he advances the argument against Mapplethorpe summarized above (Reading D at the end of this chapter).

At a later point, in a second part to the same essay, Mercer changed his mind. He argued that Mapplethorpe's aesthetic strategy exploits the ambivalent structure of fetishism (which affirms difference while at the same time denying it). It unsettles the fixity of the stereotypical 'white' gaze at the black body and reverses it:

Blacks are looked down upon and despised as worthless, ugly and ultimately unhuman. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere black bodies, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idealized as the embodiment of its aesthetic ideal.

(Mercer, 1994, p. 201)

Mercer concludes:

... it becomes necessary to reverse the reading of racial fetishism, not as a repetition of racist fantasies but as a deconstructive strategy, which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations of race and sexuality.

(*ibid.*, p. 199)

## ACTIVITY 13

Which of Mercer's two readings of fetishism in Mapplethorpe's work do you find most persuasive?

You won't expect 'correct' answers to my questions, for there are none. They are a matter of interpretation and judgement. I pose them to drive home the point about the complexity and ambivalences of representation as a practice, and to suggest how and why attempting to dismantle or subvert a racialized regime of representation is an extremely difficult exercise, about which – like so much else in representation – there can be no absolute guarantees.

## 6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have pushed our analysis of representation as a signifying practice a good deal further, opening up some difficult and complex areas of debate. What we have said about 'race' can in many instances be applied to other dimensions of 'difference'. We have analysed many examples, drawn from different periods of popular culture, of how a racialized regime of representation emerged, and identified some of its characteristic strategies and tropes. In activities, we have tried to get you to *apply* some of these techniques. We have considered several theoretical arguments as to why 'difference' and otherness are of such central importance in cultural studies.

We have thoroughly unpacked *stereotyping as a representational practice*, looking at how it works (essentializing, reductionism, naturalization, binary oppositions), at the ways it is caught up in the play of power (hegemony, power/knowledge), and at some of its deeper, more unconscious effects (fantasy, fetishism, disavowal). Finally, we have considered some of the counter-strategies which have attempted to intervene in representation, *trans-coding* negative images with new meanings. This opens out into a 'politics of representation', a struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished.

In the next chapter, the theme of *representation* is advanced further, some of the questions introduced here returning to centre stage. They include the relation between representation, sexuality and gender, issues around 'masculinity', the eroticization of 'the look' and questions about power and the subject.

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