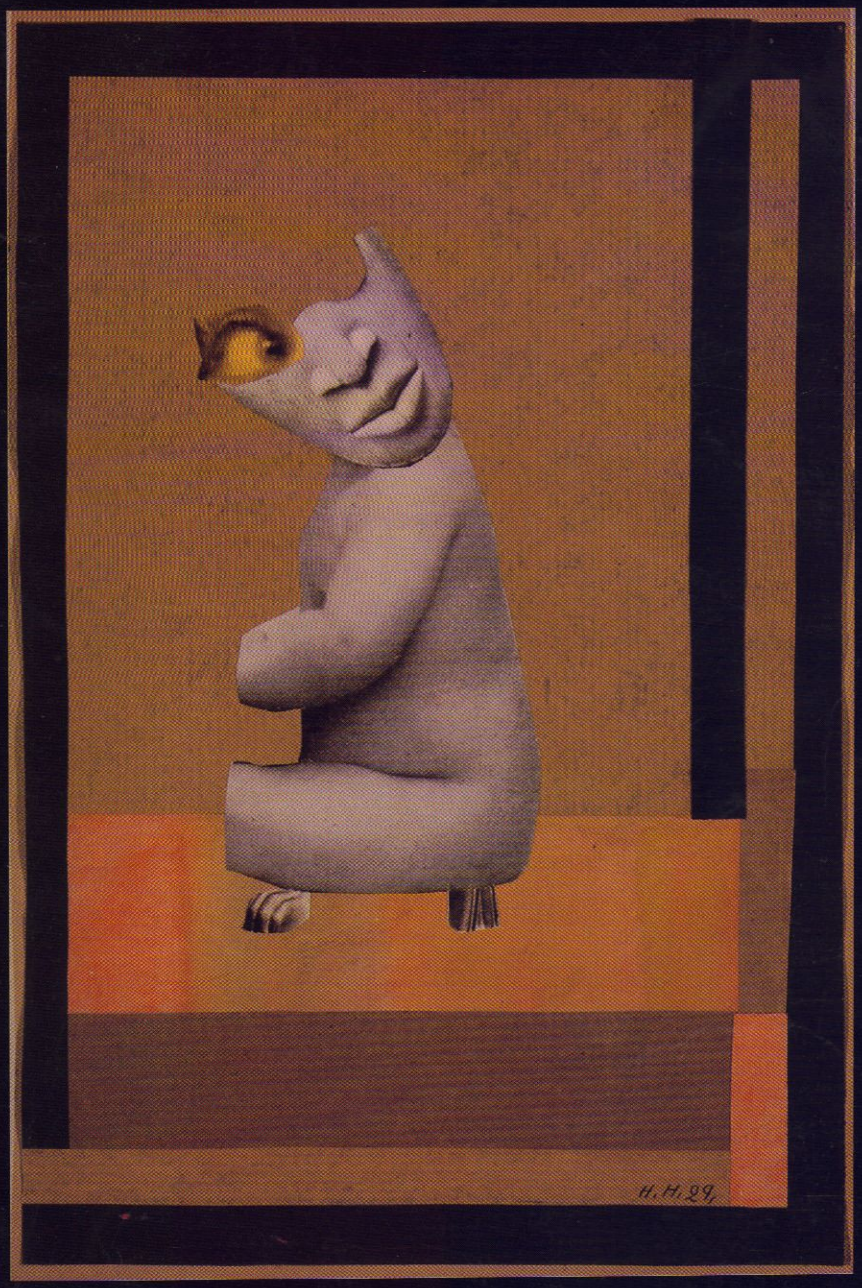
ALASTAIR BONNETT

WHITE IDENTITIES

Historical and international perspectives



PRENTICE HALL

White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives

Alastair Bonnett

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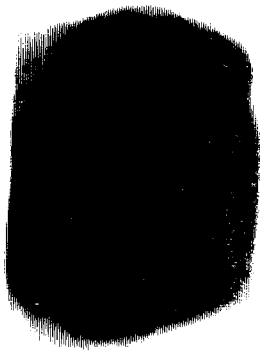

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Introduction

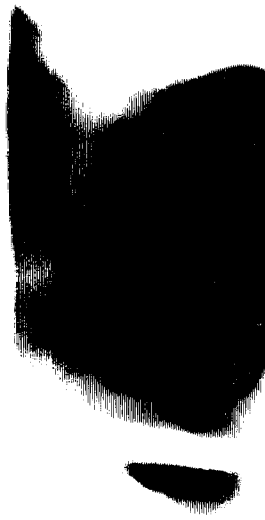
All this whiteness that burns me ...
(Fanon, 1986, p.114)

This book is about the relationship between white identity and modernity. It explores the development of whiteness as a social ideal across the planet and the way different groups have been affected by this process.

The book is not all-inclusive. The subject is just too large and too important to make such a claim. Much has been left out. However, what remains should serve as an introduction: readers are offered a basic narrative of the global history of racial whiteness, with a few episodes explored in some detail.

I shall start, though, with a complaint (perhaps it is more of an injured whine). It has not always been easy writing a book about a subject that most people think they know all about already. The reaction of white people to my endeavours has often been bemusement, tinged with annoyance. 'I know about that already,' I have been informed on more then one occasion, with the added explanation, 'I *am* white, so what's to know?' People who aren't white sometimes also asserted an intimate familiarity with the topic: they knew all about it too, because 'it's a white world, isn't it?' and, as I've been told a few times, 'aren't most books about white people anyway?' Even amongst the *cognoscenti* of ethnic and racial studies, a sense of familiarity prevails. Whiteness has been consigned to an emergent specialism, 'white studies', a sub-field that has, with a handful of exceptions, arisen from and limits its horizon of interest to the United States of America. It is now a known quantity, an example of the sophisticated state of the 'race debate' in the USA for supporters, an indication of its ridiculous 'political correctness' to its many detractors.

To have one's explorations of an area dismissed as common knowledge before they have even been committed to print is a curious sensation. It is a sense compounded by my suspicion that people actually like the idea that there is nothing much to say about whiteness; that to discuss the subject is either impossible or an entirely rhetorical exercise. It is against this claustrophobic background, in the face of this all-knowing audience, that



I issue a simple claim: *this book will change the way you look at 'the white race'*. It will do so, I suspect, largely because it will provide information on the topic that you did not already know. Drawing on material from ancient China to contemporary Brazil, from the West and the non-West, the book offers a series of views on the emergence and impact of whiteness that, although far from comprehensive, demonstrate both the global dimensions and the historical depth of the subject. It will show that the emergence of white racial identities is an integral component of the development of modernity across the world. Indeed, it is my contention that one cannot grasp the development of the modern world, and more especially the notion of what is modern and what is not, without an appreciation of the racialised nature of modernity, and, more particularly, of its association with a European identified white race.

My approach is introductory in both its scope and method. Five key aspects of white identities are addressed: the development of racial whiteness; the particularity of its local forms; its impact outside the West; the attempt to escape whiteness; and, finally, the relationship between whiteness and anti-racism. The book offers the widest possible overview of white identities and does so without presuming that readers are acquainted with either 'white studies' or any of the manifold academic disciplines that I have found it necessary to draw upon. As this implies, I have not provided a collection of summaries of what other authors have written about white identity, or sought to offer a detailed introduction to white studies (although Chapter 5 goes some way to providing the latter). Unfortunately, despite some invaluable contributions to the area, the historical limitations and narrow geographical focus of existing work in white studies means that it provides only a small window onto the subject. Thus this book will venture, every so often, onto new ground, into areas that have not been written about before, at least not with a focus on whiteness. Not unrelatedly – and to avoid disappointment – I should also add that I have decided not to spend a great deal of time examining the history of whiteness and race in the country that dominates the existing literature on these topics, the USA. Hence, readers interested solely in whiteness in the latter society might be better advised to look elsewhere (I would recommend Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1992; 1994; 1998; Morrison, 1992; Hill, 1997; and Ignatiev, 1995).

Perhaps I should also confess that I have sought to avoid offering too many generalisations derived from my own personal experiences as a white man as source material to pronounce on the world at large. Since reflexivity understood as autobiography has come to be considered the ultimate in enlightened conduct within social studies this abnegation of my responsibility to situate myself in relation to my subject may appear perverse. However, I don't think it is coincidental that the most valuable contributions to white studies by white people, the ones that have actually moved the debate forward, are those that are least self-absorbed (I am thinking here of Dyer, 1997, and the US historians Roediger, Jacobson and Ignatiev[1]). By contrast, the endless musings and reminiscences that characterise an increasing number of engagements with the issue (for example, Wray and Newitz, 1997; see also Fine *et al.*, 1997; Thompson and

Tyagi, 1996) may offer academics alluring opportunities to write about themselves but provide little context or insight into the social formation of whiteness. It is worth pointing out that white people, white men in particular, have long had the power and, evidently, the inclination to drone on about themselves. In his analysis of the cultural imagery of whiteness, Richard Dyer (1997) highlights this danger. 'Writing about whiteness', he notes, 'gives white people the go-ahead to write and talk about what in any case we have always talked about: ourselves' (p.10). Dyer also suggests that many white people appear keen to talk about themselves in the same kind of way as other groups. In other words, that in the context of 'everyone else' being able to to *assert themselves* racially and ethnically, some white people desire to do the same, to indulge and explore their 'racial essence'. Dyer calls this,

> the problem of "me-too-ism", a feeling that, amid all this (*all* this) attention being given to non-white subjects, white people are being left out. One version of this is simply the desire to have attention paid to one, which for whites is really only the wish to have all the attention once again. (p.10)

Such agendas, far from producing work that sheds light on white identities, will only help to further reify the subject. I would submit that the best way of avoiding such narcissistic, self-celebratory accounts is to push the historical and geographical boundaries of our understanding of whiteness as far as we can. In order to disorient and subvert the complacencies of racial cliché built up within one's own society and one's own experiences, one needs to learn and think about places and peoples from other times, other places. For some, such global ambitions may have a slightly colonial ring to them. After all, from the 1950s onwards, ethnic and racial studies in the West have travelled in precisely the opposite direction, rejecting imperialist anthropology for the dissection of racism in Western nations. Whilst I am in agreement with the political motivations behind this project, it has had the effect of making debates on race in the West seem absurdly insular. Moreover, the coherence of abstracting particular national narratives from the world economy – of studying 'French racism' or 'British anti-racism' – is increasingly questionable. There is now a need for writers in this field to broaden their horizons. White identities are, if nothing else, global phenomena, with global impacts. Indeed, the nature and implications of their local manifestations only come into view when they are understood *as local*. As this implies, I am not advocating a return to regional specialisms (the Africanist, the Sinologist and so on), but an attempt to engage the international and comparative diversity of whiteness. It is an approach vulnerable to eclecticism, to pirouetting from Peru to Poland in a way that inevitably infuriates readers brought up to respect national boundaries. But this is a risk worth taking, a risk that must be taken if we are ever to think and act in an informed way about racial prejudice or whiteness.

Since this introduction seems to have turned into a list of 'risks and 'dangers', let me conclude with one last warning. It is not my intention in this book to suggest that whiteness is necessarily a determining factor in

each and every social or political situation. Although integral to modernity, its form and importance are historically and geographically contingent. The confusion and conflation of whiteness with words that at different times and in different places have been associated with it, such as 'European' and 'Western', necessitate that the term's synonyms, its cognitive alignments, form part of our study. Moreover, as other authors have explained, whiteness is always enacted in association with class and gender (Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1992; 1994). I would hope this text does not inspire anyone to begin claiming that whiteness is always and everywhere the most pressing issue of the hour. The utility of the present study lies in its insistence upon the context of whiteness, its place *within a wider system of social change*. To fetishise whiteness is to miss the point. Moreover, as I hope to show, the power of whiteness rarely works in such as a way as to allow one to isolate and dispatch a discrete 'bad racist white influence'. The uncomfortable truth is that white identity resides in social forces and categories, such as 'modernisation', 'development' and 'civilisation', with which we are all engaged in some way. We may justifiably hope to encourage the deracialisation of these processes, to open them up to less Eurocentric ends. Whiteness can, and I am in no doubt one day will, be superseded, made to appear as archaic an identity as Tuton or Gaul. But to imagine that it is a *homogenous and alien* 'enemy' – something other to, or inherently outside of, anti-racism – is a romantic delusion.

Introducing white identities in five chapters

My focus on the social formation of whiteness is methodologically narrowed in the following five chapters by a concentration on the way people categorise and represent themselves and others. I shall be drawing on a variety of first-hand testimonies, from writers, politicians and other commentators, to explain and to exemplify the nature of white identity.

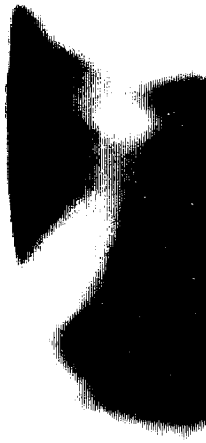
The book starts with a broad overview of the rise of racial whiteness. More specifically, Chapter 1 provides a critical history of the conflation of European and white identities. It commences with a discussion of premodern white identities in China and the Middle East. The production of a racialised European white identity is then examined. The obsessional, exclusionary character of European racial whiteness is related to the gradual marginalisation of non-European white identities. Drawing primarily on late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century commentaries, it is also argued that the excessive idealisation of whiteness characteristic of its modern European form engenders an unstable and contradictory identity: in societies structured upon class, ethnic and gender hierarchies the 'burden of whiteness' cannot be equally apportioned.

Chapter 2 offers a geographically local view of the formation of white identity. In contrast to the previous chapter, it may be seen as a case study of the development of racial whiteness within one particular country. More precisely, the chapter offers an explanation of how and why the

British working class, from being marginal to white identity in the nineteenth century, came to adopt and adapt this identity in the twentieth century. The changing position of whiteness within the symbolic constitution of capitalism is discussed. The transition from whiteness as a bourgeois identity within Victorian, relatively laissez-faire, capitalism to whiteness as a popular, or mass, identity within the more state interventionist capitalism of the twentieth century is used to exemplify the mutable nature, and political complexities, of the relationship between working class and white identities.

Chapter 3 opens out the geographical focus again to explore the formation of 'white modernity' in non-Western societies in the twentieth century. The empirical emphasis is upon Latin America and Japan. My account is divided into two. In the first section I address Latin America, focusing on the history of 'national whitening' through selective immigration policies in Brazil and Venezuela, before turning to a very specific contemporary phenomenon, namely the appeal of the white, blonde Brazilian 'megastar' Xuxa. In the second section I introduce material from East Asia. More specifically, I discuss the history of the adoption but also the assimilation – what might be called the strategic reading and appropriation – of whiteness in contemporary Japan.

It is no easy thing to escape whiteness, whatever one's skin colour. To invert the expectations and ideals of whiteness can all too easily slide into appropriating a white, not to mention colonial, myth of the savage and exotic other. This may be framed as 'the problem of primitivism'. It is a problem most commonly seen as visited upon white radicals who feel themselves alienated from 'white, Western, capitalist' society. However, as Chapter 4 argues, primitivism is neither the preserve of a radical elite nor of white people. It is part and parcel, an inevitable consequence, of the development and dissemination of racialised modernity and, as such, a socially ubiquitous and international force. Despite this slightly unorthodox thesis, Chapter 4 also aims to provide a conventional introduction to the subject of primitivism. It has four sections. The first is devoted to the primitivism of the group usually associated with the term 'Western avant-garde artists'. The second section concerns a particular individual, Grey Owl (also known as Archie Belaney), an Englishman who not only chose to live as a native Canadian but who also gave lectures throughout England and North America in the 1930s (preaching his message of ecological conservation and anti-modernity), whilst claiming to be a 'half-caste'. The mythopoetic men's movement forms the empirical focus of the third section of Chapter 4. Like many primitivists, mythopoetic men have been subjected to a lot of ridicule and, not unrelatedly, seem to transgress many expectations concerning the conduct of modern, civilised adults. They provide a particularly explicit example of the intersection of masculinity and primitivism – more precisely, the way escapes from whiteness can be conflated with a flight into the supposedly more natural and stable gender relations of pre- or non-modern societies. The class dynamic of the movement is also addressed, with the widespread notion that it reflects a current 'crisis of middle-class masculinity' being, if not disproved, at least found sociologically simplistic. The final section of



Chapter 4 looks, albeit it in an eclectic and unsystematic fashion, at the place of primitivism in non-Western societies. More especially, the relationship between primitivism, the development of national identity and the promotion of tourism is discussed in a number of so-called 'developing' countries.

The fifth and final chapter addresses the relationship between white identity and anti-racism. The image and role of whites in anti-racism is explored. Drawing on British and North American material, it is suggested that white identity is reified within most orthodox anti-racism, a process that offers whites the position of altruistic observers within the anti-racist struggle, of people whose good will must be constantly appealed to but who have no real stake in anti-racist change. Against this, some more recent and nuanced tendencies within anti-racist 'white studies' are considered.

1. The two exceptions I would make to this rather blanket observation are Vron Ware's (1992) study of the emergence of 'white feminism', *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, and Crispin Sartwell's (1998) painfully self-conscious but subtle observations on seeing his own whiteness in the mirror of African-American identity, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity*.

CHAPTER 1

Who was t non-Europ formation

Introduction

The topic of white studies. Most sign of how different United States has Roediger 1992: 1 insightful, critical gies of Europea forms of whitene ness, developed b Europe, have rece

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