

PERFORMING WHITENESS

The history of moving pictures is a living record of performances of whiteness, class, gender, and myriad identity markers, such as sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity. It is ironic and fascinating that, in the face of the biological evidence that race really doesn't exist, more than a century of filmic performances of whiteness would appear to insist on the existence and visual supremacy of whiteness. With the end of the twentieth century, the rise of "whiteness studies" worked to destabilize the assumptions behind whiteness as a cultural norm. The work of many critics, especially Richard Dyer, called into question the "norm" of whiteness, noting that those who do not fall into the white category are marked as *other* while, "at the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (*White* 3). More recently, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues that whiteness should not describe a group or race; it should instead be seen as a *term* that makes the logic of race thinking possible. Seshadri-Crooks wishes to shake up notions about race in her psychoanalytic study of whiteness, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*.

We must develop a new adversarial aesthetics that will throw racial signification into disarray. Given that race discourse was produced in a thorough visual culture, it is necessary that the visual itself be used against the scopic regime of race. . . . I am proposing an adversarial aesthetics that will destabilize racial looking so that racial identity will always be uncertain and unstable. (158–59)

In keeping with Dyer, who sees his project as "making whiteness strange" (*White* 4), I also wish to make whiteness strange by studying

the performance of whiteness in moving pictures and other forms. My project is a postmodern attempt to reconstruct, deconstruct, and examine the performance of whiteness in moving images. The performance of whiteness in cinema may be viewed as a sort of cultural, repetitive-stress dis-ease, a place where we can return to the repressed, the disordered, and the destabilized; whether that be whiteness, class, or compulsory heterosexuality, the cinema is a factory of identity performances. It is the garment center of white fabrication. The cinema has been remarkably successful at imposing whiteness as a cultural norm, even as it exposes the inherent instability of such arguably artificial binaries as male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, classed/not classed. It is as though the cinema has sought to hold up these binaries with an almost unrelenting fervor that insists on the definition of the body through performance.

Whiteness does not exist at the biological level. It is a cultural construct, yet whiteness defines us and limits us. I don't believe in whiteness, yet I am writing a book about the performance of whiteness in moving images. I don't believe in whiteness, yet I am supposed to be white. I am defined as such, and, to perform American whiteness correctly, I am expected to erase all signs of my hybrid ethnicity: Irish, Dutch, African American, and Native American. The tenets of postmodernism apply to the study of whiteness. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum as a copy lacking an original (*Simulacra*) can be applied to whiteness. The failed search of white supremacists and others for a "lost pure white race" proves this point. Whiteness lacks an original, yet it is performed and reperformed in myriad ways, so much so that it seems "natural" to most. It is taken for granted—the norm that is unmarked. To question whiteness is to question the air around us; it's always there, but nobody acknowledges it. But air is real, unlike whiteness, which has no biological basis. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as a questioning of all master narratives (see Jameson xii).

Whiteness is a master narrative that is increasingly being questioned and marked. Postmodernists reconfigure identity as a performance that is itself fractured, unstable, and mutable. White performances are simulacra, falsely stabilized by master narratives that themselves are suspect, and whiteness itself is a construct that needs constant upkeep. It is in the cracks and fissures of performative whiteness that we can begin the dismantling of whiteness as norm. A postmodern approach exposes cracks

and fissures in whiteness and white performativity. The scope of this study is wide and uses postmodern pastiche. Thus I discuss films across all genres, from sci-fi classics to more recent blockbusters. I introduce a concept of “whiteface” and connect it to what I call *white space*, a post-modern concept of on-screen space where identity is negotiated, mutable, and transitory. I discuss such notions as white minstrelsy, whiteness as its own other, and on-screen performances of the good-white body and the bad-white body. I connect white performativity to consumer identity. I discuss class issues and the practice of “class-passing,” as well as related issues, such as race, sexuality, and ethnicity. In this book I employ performance studies, cultural studies, and other newly emerging disciplines. These disciplines displace the supremacy and artificial hegemony of auteur studies, psychoanalytic studies, and even to some extent spectatorship studies. While these approaches are often quite useful, theorists sometimes forget to take into account the wider cultural significance of the performing white body that supports the supremacy of the norm of whiteness. Just like race and racism, films are a *coproduction* of time, place, culture, authorship, desire, spectator mediation, and acting, among many other factors and forces, including such institutions as the Motion Picture Production Code, but drawing from a wide range of sometimes unstable hegemonies. Performance gives the *illusion* of stability, but we should always remember that performance is a fabrication, a fake that has become a necessity in the regime of identity markers in the cinema. Judith Butler speaks to the issue of performance as an organizing principle of identity.

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. (173)

Even before the birth of cinema, it is clear that the visual representations of whiteness were already difficult to maintain. Early photographic manuals reveal the instability of whiteness and the lengths to which practitioners went to establish white as the norm, and the goal of lighting was “the elimination of shadow” (*White* 96). Richard Dyer—in

addition to presenting an astute discussion of cinema lighting, emulsion, and aesthetics, all of which are designed to stabilize and capture whiteness on film and/or videotape—details the extent to which photographers and cinematographers went to fabricate whiteness in performers. Under the harsh, hot arc lights, film actors in classic Hollywood films were forced to wear thickly applied white makeup, causing them to sweat profusely under this performative facial mask. This unpleasant makeup was also used in everyday performance of whiteness, especially in the early twentieth century. It is worth noting that whites went to great lengths to foster the public's acceptance of the construct of whiteness, which is clearly an artificial and *performed* "norm." For the purpose of public performance, either live or on the screen, it seemed that white people themselves were not quite *white* enough. To create the illusion of whiteness, they needed to be covered with gluelike white face paint and perform in a sort of whiteface. The concept of whiteface, then, while significant, has largely been unexplored in recent critical theory, while blackface performativity justifiably has been the subject of intense cultural scrutiny. Whiteface not only includes, in my estimation, unnaturally white makeup but also careful lighting and an insistence on the binaries of black and white, especially notable in the early films of Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford, to use Dyer's examples. Actors in early cinema were not just pressed into service to construct genres, genders, sexualities, and classes; they faked and seemingly "normed" a look of whiteness that is itself a grotesque parody, a parody as bizarre, in a way, as that of blackface. This practice persists to the present day in television, theatrical, and motion picture makeup, which artificially whitens the color of a white artist's skin, to make the performer seem "whiter than white," an irresistible presence on the screen or stage. I agree with Valerie Babb, who writes, "[O]nly by coming to a full awareness of the ways in which an artificially crafted identity was constructed to maintain hierarchy and divisiveness can any meaningful and useful dialogue on race begin" (5–6). Coming to awareness includes the recognition of whiteness as a performed construct. One proof of the constructedness of whiteness is the comedy of Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy, and Margaret Cho, who all do impressions of white performance. Such comics point out the artificiality of speaking, walking, and generally performing whiteness.

Some might claim that it will be impossible to disturb the category of whiteness. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence of whiteness's continu-

ing to avoid the radar screen of cultural and social consciousness when it comes to discussions of race. Invoke the word *race* and you invoke, for most listeners, images of the “nonwhite other.” In my daily life as a “white” professor, I teach predominately “white” students. Confronted with topics about race, most of my students opt out of the discussion, as if they have no race, no ethnicity, and no investment in the stakes of race as social discourse and the construction of race in the cinema. Confronted with the idea of white privilege, “white” students sometimes respond with jealousy: “I don’t really have a culture,” one student told me. Students also claim disinterestedness, or they display guilt, which Dyer and others have pointed out is a “blocking emotion” (*White* 11). While teaching a course in postcolonialism, I had great success in destabilizing “white” students’ notions of whiteness in conjunction with examining colonial jungle films, such as *King Kong* (1933), *She* (1965), and *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1932). As the course progressed, students became increasingly comfortable with othering whiteness and studying the ways in which whiteness has been introduced, rehearsed, and performed in colonialist cinema. Whiteness might be *presumed* to be a stable category that eludes study, but whiteness can indeed be made strange in the same way that heterosexuality can be displaced as the norm, made strange. Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but I must agree with Babb, who predicts the inevitable fall of the category of “whiteness”: “Ultimately, the insularity that whiteness needs to maintain itself—the self-absorbed conversations, the moving only within a set of like people, the exclusive living enclaves—will become difficult to maintain” (172).

The realization that race is largely a cultural construct and that both *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality* are terms and norms that are relatively new and easily destabilized suggests a new paradigm for undermining the notion and category of whiteness. As C. Loring Brace persuasively argues, “[T]he concept of race does not appear until the trans-Atlantic voyages of the Renaissance” (qtd. in Saulny 3). “There was no whiteness prior to the seventeenth century,” agrees Manning Marable. “Whiteness is the negation of something else. The something else are Africans who are described by Europeans not by their religion or nationality but by the color of their skin. And nowhere in Africa did Africans call themselves ‘black’” (qtd. in Saulny 3). Dr. Ife Williams details how, as the colonial process moved forward in the 1600s, “people with dark skin were demonized in order to justify their exploitation. The people in power spread the belief that ‘[t]hese

people are nothing but monkeys. We're helping them out" (qtd. in Saulny 3). Similarly, the categories and binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality were not named or concretized until the late nineteenth century, when the "proclamation of the homosexual's existence preceded the public unveiling of the heterosexual" (Katz 54). In fact, it seems to have taken at least a few decades for there to be an agreement on the meaning of the terms, and initially *heterosexual* was a term associated with perversion or "non-procreative perversion" (54). The emphasis was on procreation, and procreation was seen as the norm. Any other motive for sex was once seen as perverse; even the first uses of the term *heterosexual* were associated with perversion.

The earliest-known use of the word *heterosexual* in the United States occurs in an article by Dr. James G. Kiernan, published in a Chicago medical journal in May 1892.

Heterosexual was not equated here with normal sex, but with perversion—a definitional tradition that lasted in middle-class culture into the 1920s. Kiernan linked heterosexual to one of several "abnormal manifestations of the sexual appetite"—in a list of "sexual perversions proper"—in an article on "Sexual Perversion." (Katz 19)

Thus heterosexuals were once seen as "deviants"; their worst inclinations were toward "modes of ensuring pleasure without reproducing the species" (20). This emphasis on reproduction of the species is matched only by the doggedness seen in early cinema that worked to maintain and perform whiteness. Indeed, the stabilization of the white heteronormative goes hand-in-hand and is deeply connected, according to Dyer.

Race and gender are ineluctably intertwined, through the primacy of heterosexuality in reproducing the former and defining the latter. It is a productively unstable alliance. . . . *Whites must reproduce themselves*, yet they must also control and transcend their bodies. Only by (impossibly) doing both can they be white. Thus are produced some of the great narrative dilemmas of whiteness, notably romance, adultery, rape and pornography. (*White* 30; my emphasis)

White heterosexuals are thus expected to reproduce themselves. Homosexuality remains suspect to many because homosexual acts do not result in procreation.

Just as it took a great deal of time and effort to define and maintain whiteness, it took quite a bit of effort and time to invent and maintain the norms and binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality, only to see these categories disrupted and destabilized by bisexuality, transvestism, intersexuality, and the transgendered, not to mention the persistent campaign of queer (and straight) activists who continue to campaign against a culture of compulsory heterosexuality. We may still live in a world of white dominance and heterocentrism, but I think we can agree that we are in the midst of postmodern destabilizing forces when it comes to sexuality and race. Though the dominant cinema and the media continue to norm whiteness and heterosexuality, it seems to take Herculean effort to maintain the binaries necessary to stabilize white heterotopia and supremacy. Many scholars, thinkers, and activists are actively challenging the visual systems that result in othering. Just as black activists remain committed to displacing white visual utopias that seek to other them, whites need to begin to challenge the validity of whiteness, question white privilege and norming, and study the images and performances that seek to define them.

In *The Color of Sex* Mason Stokes notes that “whiteness and heterosexuality can be usefully seen as analogous structures—normative copartners in the coercions of racial and sexual power” (191). A quick glance at contemporary mainstream cinema reveals, perhaps not surprisingly, an emphatically white heterocentric world. *The Mummy Returns* (2001) revolves around a heterosexual white couple (Brendan Fraser as action-figure hero Rick O’Connell and Rachel Weisz as the equally athletic Evelyn Carnahan O’Connell) and their adventures into the world of the “other,” a predictably Orientalized mixture of Egyptian, Arab, and unidentifiable ethnic types. They are aided by a grinning, snaggletoothed, black British aviator, who whisks them out of danger with his hot-air balloon. This character, Izzy, played by Shaun Parkes, performs no function in the film other than fulfilling the needs of the central white couple and their equally white blond son, Alex (Freddie Boath). If this scenario reminds you of countless films that rely on a similar formula, it should: this is a formula that makes white American viewers feel comfortable. It places black maleness safely to the side. The nonthreatening, nonsexual, black other performs not only as buddy, servant, and helpmate but also as a necessary ingredient in the film’s racial makeup to fully mark the whiteness of the nuclear family in the film and, by extension, the white audience.

Rick O'Connell, in addition to having his black buddy, also enjoys the services of his effeminate brother-in-law, Jonathan Carnahan (played by John Hannah). Obviously coded as gay, this character serves as a safely neutral other to the central couple's performative heterosexuality. Jonathan is the butt of most of the jokes of the film; he is an ineffectual bumbler in the style of the movie "pansies" of the 1930s, a stereotype that John Hannah plays to the hilt. The Jonathan character is also greedy, and on several occasions he places various members of the cast in peril, due either to his avarice or to his negligence. Near the end of the film, for example, Jonathan, by reaching for a final piece of precious archaeological treasure, almost tips over the hot-air balloon in which Rick, Evelyn, and Alex are escaping. Izzy and Jonathan also must spend time arguing over the loot that they have illegally acquired, in true colonialist fashion, thus demonstrating the goodness and civility of Rick, Evelyn, and Alex, who are not out for colonial loot but rather for pure science. Nevertheless, Jonathan can be counted upon when truly needed: in one pivotal scene Jonathan helps Alex restore life to Evelyn by using the boy's knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The Mummy Returns thus readily, even eagerly, conforms to the white hero-black buddy-queer sidekick formula that reaches back into the moribund imagination of Hollywood and the machine of whiteness, which is exemplified in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of mainstream films. In *King Kong* (1933) the great white hunter (Carl Denham [played by Robert Armstrong]) and his heterosexual love interest (Ann Darrow [Fay Wray]) seek to capture a great black ape on Skull Island, an obviously fabricated jungle. Fay Wray's white female goddess Ann is made to appear whiter than white through lighting, blondness, and clothing, but it is the threat of black male sexuality and miscegenation that blatantly reifies her whiteness. King Kong himself is a stand-in for the threat of black male sexuality: as Thomas Doherty notes, when King Kong is brought to America, he is "chained and sedated below the decks of the expeditionary ship" (290), an enslaved black body not unlike a slave on his way to serve white America. The white actors perform the central quest of the narrative. Their performances are marked by routine assumptions of white privilege and mistreatment of those who are forced to serve them.

Scores of other white American films have featured the "good black" buddy-servant in such disparate productions as *Trader Horn* (1931), which features not only an "African" manservant, played by Mutia

Omoolu, but also a Latino protégé, Peru, played by a decidedly effeminate Duncan Renaldo. In both cases the nonwhite other is included in the narrative to emphasize the bravery, intelligence, and effective heteroperformativity of the white male adventurer and the beauty and sexual supremacy of the virginal white female. In *Casablanca* (1942), one of the more famous films of the 1940s, we find African American Dooley Wilson as Sam, the faithful piano player in Rick's Café, along with effeminate Vichy functionary Claude Rains as Captain Louis Renault, *aiding* the white heterosexuals Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa Lund Laszlo (Ingrid Bergman) in their battle against the Nazis. *Casablanca* is thus a white film about white people in war-torn Morocco under the Vichy regime. If it were a film about African Americans during the Civil War, such as *Glory* (1989), it would be carefully marked (and marketed) as a "black film." Even in such a black film, of course, we learn about the bravery and heroic efforts of a white Northerner, Colonel Robert Shaw (played by Matthew Broderick), who plays a more significant role than the supporting actors who play the first unit of African American soldiers to fight in the Civil War. Denzel Washington (as Private Trip), Morgan Freeman (as Sergeant Major John Rawlins), and the other African American actors perform blackness as defined by the militaristic code of heroism, but it is always done in the service of white American supremacy. Indeed, Matthew Broderick was praised for his performance, almost as if his performing whiteness in the confines of a black film was special and heroic in itself. In the *Lethal Weapon* films Danny Glover plays Roger Murtaugh, the black sidekick for Mel Gibson's heroic white cop, Martin Riggs. The black female sidekick also frequently aids whites with their white problems in such films as *Boys on the Side* (1995) and *Ghost* (1990), the celebrated white heterocentric vehicle in which Sam Wheat (Patrick Swayze) "borrows" Whoopi Goldberg's blackness (in the character of the semifraudulent medium Oda Mae Brown) to communicate with his fiancée, Molly Jensen (Demi Moore). Even white ghosts from the dead can count on the service of blackness. The task of listing all of the films in the white American canon that emphatically trade on blackness to help, fix, and mediate white heterosexual fantasies would be monumental and impossible. One might expect more recent films to limit the reliance on the black helper, but this is not the case.

In *Pearl Harbor* (2001) white American cultural icons Ben Affleck, Josh Hartnett, and Kate Beckinsale are aided by Cuba Gooding, Jr., an

actor who by all rights should be commanding the salaries of the top-paid actors and ought to be able single-handedly to open a blockbuster, but his blackness works against him in white-controlled Hollywood and white America. So far, Gooding is acceptable to white America in secondary roles but not in central, leading roles. Don Cheadle is another African American actor who ought to be the lead character but is often relegated to the role of the sidekick, best friend, or enabler of white folks. Cheadle's accomplished performance in *The Rat Pack* (1998) as Sammy Davis, Jr., demonstrably proved that he is capable of delivering a stellar performance, but Hollywood and its audiences have yet to allow him the opportunity to open a big-budget vehicle, such as *Pearl Harbor*. But if Cheadle had been the lead in *Pearl Harbor*, the film would probably have been considered a black film and then would probably have been relegated to low-budget status. Hollywood executives are not always correct in their assumptions about audiences. *Pearl Harbor* did not do the business that was expected. But the surprise hit of the summer of 2001 was *Rush Hour 2*, a film that does not feature a white leading man, couple, or buddy team. *Rush Hour 2* features Hong Kong action star Jackie Chan and top-billed African American comedian Chris Tucker in a culture-clash comedy that tapped into a "hidden" but enthusiastic audience. Meanwhile, most of the summer fare offered in 2001 suffers from a sort of race profiling that is routinely practiced in Hollywood casting and performances. The feature-length cartoon film *Shrek* (2001) uses Eddie Murphy's voice to give life to an animated donkey, who serves as a sidekick to an ogrelike animated character voiced by Mike Myers, in pursuit of the heart of Princess Fiona (Cameron Diaz). Martin Lawrence gets top billing over Danny DeVito in the comedy *What's the Worst That Can Happen?* (2001), but only because Lawrence is also one of the executive producers of the film. White Americans have always been comfortable with African Americans as comics, who are routinely used as cultural and social stereotypes in the service of Hollywood's hegemonic white cinematic discourse. Orlando Jones (as Dr. Harry Block) is thus prominently featured in photos, television spots, and theatrical trailers for *Evolution* (2001) stereotypically popping his eyes and grinning to advertise the film. Yet Jones is billed after a white actor, David Duchovny, known for his television work with aliens and "others" on *The X Files*. Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) is a vehicle for white performativity to engage with the otherness of supposed lost civilizations, and Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelli-*

gence (2001) allows white actors Haley Joel Osment (as the adorable child cyborg David) and Jude Law (as Gigolo Joe) likewise to engage in otherness, here enacted within the genre formulas of science fiction, a zone in which issues of race can be evaded or subverted, which perhaps explains audience acceptance of Tim Burton's remake of *Planet of the Apes* (2001). Given white culture's history of equating Africans and African Americans with apes, *Planet of the Apes* offers yet another "comforting" example of whites donning black ape-face with cultural impunity. The original *Apes* series, begun in 1968 with *Planet of the Apes* and ending in 1973 with *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, not counting the many spin-offs in television movies, animated cartoons, and even a short-lived series, proves that the concept is both durable and perennially popular.

In the many *Tarzan* films whites found an opportunity to critique white colonialism but also to engage in resuscitating the missing link in the Darwinian chain: the white male (most famously played by Johnny Weissmuller) who was raised in the jungle. When Weissmuller's Tarzan was retired, he became Jungle Jim in the long-running series of cheap *Jungle Jim* films of the early 1950s. Tarzan's and Jungle Jim's heroism are seen as equal to that of other "good natives," such as Mowgli (played by Sabu) in *The Jungle Book* (1942) and Bomba (Johnny Sheffield) in the popular *Bomba* films made in the late 1940s and 1950s for juvenile (and mostly male) white American audiences. White viewers, through Sheffield, Sabu, Weissmuller, and the heavily camouflaged actors in the many *Planet of the Apes* films, are allowed, paradoxically, to perform otherness, as well as other whiteness. In short, they are encouraged temporarily to leave whiteness behind and to engage in a hybridity that is otherwise discouraged and was even unallowable under the original Code. Not only was race mixing, also known as "miscegenation," forbidden by the Motion Picture Production Code, but specific rules were set out that clearly marked the zones of the white body that were allowed to be shown. By setting films in "exotic" locales, and by playing out fears and fantasies of race mixing in the genre of the adventure—or jungle—film, whites invented a zone in which the Code's rules no longer enslaved them. Though they were still subject to the Code, film producers pushed the envelope as far as possible in the *Tarzan* films and in subsequent jungle films. As in the *Tarzan* series, the *Planet of the Apes* films allow white audiences a form of fantasy, an escape from the white "civilized" body of colonialism and consumption, and an idyllic return to nature. Both types of films have enjoyed



FIGURE 1. Johnny Weissmuller as the white king of the jungle in *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1932). Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger Archives.

considerable box-office success, perhaps because, as Walt Morton suggests, “a large part of the . . . audience enjoys a narcissistic identification with the power-fantasy suggested by Tarzan’s strength and command of nature” (113). Perhaps the *Apes* films are much like the *Tarzan* films to white audiences, for, as Dyer comments, “With *Tarzan*, the white man can be king of the jungle without loss of oneness to it. *Tarzan* films effect an imaginary reconciliation between the enjoyment of colonial power and the ecological price of colonialism” (*White* 158).

White scientists have long been fascinated with the relationship between apes and humans, and this fascination is clearly equaled by a racist fascination with the supposed close connection between Africans and apes. This trope reoccurs in the *Planet of the Apes* films, but added to this white cultural mythmaking is an attempt to get a grip on American historical struggles having to do with race. Rather than deal head-on with these struggles, whites prefer to deal with such issues in the sci-fi or adventure genre vehicles that Hollywood regularly churns out with renewed vigor and hype. As Ed Guerrero wrote in 1993 of the *Planet of the Apes* quintet, “The struggles and reversals between futuristic apes and humans form a sustained allegory not only for slavery but also [for] the burdens of racial exploitation, the civil rights movement, and the black rebellion that followed it” (43). Perhaps more importantly, these films bring up the specter of slavery without making the white viewer at all uncomfortable. Whites are even able to distance themselves smugly from their colonial past and have the spectatorial pleasure of being removed from the history of slavery and racial and economic colonial exploitation. As Guerrero asserts, “[S]lavery’s sedimentation can be [as] momentary and [as] fleeting as a sentence or a musical refrain threaded into the film’s soundtrack” (43).

Without an interest in sustaining fantasies about evolutionary development and unspoken fears of racial difference, the maintenance of the *Planet of the Apes* films would be impossible, but few white critics seem aware of the underpinnings and assumptions of these films. Londa Schiebinger writes extensively about the fascination with apes in the seventeenth century and during the Middle Ages, noting that, “Humans—part brute, part angel—were thought to link the mortal world to the divine” (80), and there was much discussion of whether apes could think, speak, reason, or even have table manners. Carolus Linnaeus actually ranked one type of ape “in the same genus as humans . . . [though] most

naturalists maintained that while apes might bear human characteristics, they certainly were not human” (81). Linnaeus also noted that apes were clearly good at parenting. Other naturalists noted that apes mourned their dead. But apes’ inability to speak placed them below humans on the evolutionary scale, even though some early naturalists insisted that apes were capable of speech. Perhaps more important than the question of speech was the question of whether apes were able to be civil and were civilizable. The horrifying truth is that the same questions were applied to Africans themselves, and most readers should be familiar with the exhibition of Africans such as Sarah Baartman (otherwise known as the “Hottentot Venus”), who was displayed in Europe in the nineteenth century to “prove” the anatomical difference between Europeans and Africans. White spectators could poke and prod her anatomy and note her supposed large buttocks and genitalia. Baartman was not the only human to be put on display in such a ghastly manner. Humans of non-European extraction were viewed as indigenous ethnographic specimens, to be displayed and examined as one would display and examine any other scientific specimen. As Fatimah Tobing Rony comments, “At the beginning of the [twentieth] century, a Chirichiri man named Ota Benga from the Kasai region of what is now Zaire was exhibited at the Bronx Zoo” (158). Benga, along with other “human specimens,” was also on display at the St. Louis World’s Fair and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where he lived. It is notable that Benga was displayed in the “monkey house” (Rony 158) at the Bronx Zoo. In addition, ethnographic “specimens,” especially Native Americans and Africans, were put on visual display in countless ethnographic films, including the ethnographic fiction film, still celebrated today in film circles, *Nanook of the North* (1922). It seems as if white moviegoers in the earliest years of the twenty-first century are as fascinated with a ranking of races and the desire to find a missing link between man and ape as they were in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

Tim Burton’s *Planet of the Apes* draws on these fascinations and returns the apes to their proper place as noble savages. As Bill Desowitz notes in a *New York Times* preview of the film, Burton is “an old hand at bizarre reversals and the blurring of primitive and civilized behavior” (30). According to Desowitz, “indigenous humans can talk in this version, though instead of caged beasts they are now slaves and pets” (30). Most interesting is that white actors, such as Helena Bonham Carter, play the

parts of the beasts. Bonham Carter plays a chimpanzee human rights activist, while Tim Roth plays a tyrannical chimpanzee. The point of the film is that humans can be overtaken by another intelligent species, but the film can't be disentangled from its racial politics. Nevertheless, Desowitz emphasizes the special effects of the film.

But the apes in the new film hardly resemble their predecessors. Technological advances in makeup design have allowed Rick Baker to go way beyond John Chambers's ground-breaking, Oscar-winning work in the original film. Mr. Baker's creatures look and act more like real apes. They are faster, quicker and more powerful. (Desowitz 3)

Like the *Tarzan* films, *Planet of the Apes* offers a place for whites to perform the other in an imaginary exotic locale, once again effecting an imaginary reconciliation between the races and a safe place to consider the wages of slavery and colonialism, but the film is at once both a reminder of race relations and a token pacifier for the white audience.

The *Planet of the Apes* series operates at the fringes of the scientific discourse of primate studies, for, as Donna Haraway argues,

The primate field, naturalistic and textual, has been a site for elaborating and contesting the bio-politics of difference and identity for members of industrial and post-industrial cultures. Cloning is simultaneously a literal natural and a cultural technology, a science fiction staple, and a mythic figure for the repetition of the same, for a stable identity and a safe route through time seemingly outside human reach. Evolutionary biology's bottom line on difference is succinctly stated . . . [thusly:] in the end, non-identity is antagonistic; it always threatens the survival of cooperative relationships. In the end, only the sign of the Same, of the replication of the one identical to itself, seems to promise peace. (368–69)

This primal story is of the constructedness of whiteness and the fear of its instability; or, as Michael Atkinson puts it, regarding the original *Planet of the Apes*, “[S]omewhere under the skin the central ordeal of [Charlton] Heston's missing link is one we face only in our darkest dreams” (9). The films themselves exist in the boundaries of racist primate constructs, forcing “you to discount any respite from the relentless dialectic of oppression because it all leads you to a genocidal *auto-da-fé* we've already witnessed” (14). To some extent, the *Planet of the Apes* cycle asks



FIGURE 2. Charlton Heston as a slave in the original version of *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger Archives.

the white viewer to make whiteness strange and to engage in self-othering. The director of the original film, Franklin Schaffner, points to the mirroring and self-othering effect that he intended: “Hopefully, it worked on the level that you were sitting and watching a simian society functioning, and it occurred to you, suddenly that you were in a hall of mirrors, looking at yourself” (qtd. in Sobchack, *Screening* 182). This self-reflexivity fluctuates with fear, and it is interesting that humans are the dominated species in most of the *Planet of the Apes* films. Clearly, then, as Eric Greene proposes, “[T]here is a long-standing fear among whites in the United States of an ‘exchange of situation; a loss of racial domination’” (25). Thus we have Tim Burton’s stab at the same old white narrative that amounts to collective white America’s novel form of self-reflective navel gazing, mirroring, and simultaneous distancing from culpability.

If the *Planet of the Apes* saga ultimately results in stabilizing whiteness, does cybertechnology, genetic science, and the very unscientific practice of counting people by racial category work to foster a sense of stability or instability when it comes to whiteness? Ironically, the census system, which has been overhauled and reworked to include more ethnic types and now allows people to check more than one racial or ethnic type, exposes the limits of race thinking in the United States. People may now call themselves both black and Native American or both white and Native American, for example. But according to Steven A. Holmes of the *New York Times*, “[T]he overwhelming bulk of the 6.8 million people who listed themselves as multiracial—will be counted as members of the minority” (1). Holmes notes that such logic is an extension of the three-fifths compromise, wherein framers of the U.S. Constitution “reached a compromise to count black slaves as three-fifths of a person” (1), and is also reminiscent of the one-drop rule. Counting one’s race is a subjective matter, as is being counted by race. The Los Angeles Police Department, in response to the public outcry against racial profiling and racial harassment, is now required collectively to “record what they perceive is the race, ethnicity, or national origin of each driver they stop” (Rodriguez 1), but most notably they must record this “data” “without asking a direct question” (1). How are officers supposed to guess a person’s race or national origin? The powers that be have apparently agreed that straightforwardly asking citizens their race is out of the question. “[A]ll agree that explicitly asking people their racial background would only worsen the tensions between the police and the communities they serve” (5). Besides,

as Margo J. Schlanger, a professor at Harvard Law School, states, “We’re not trying to get at truth, we’re trying to get at bias” (qtd. in Rodriguez 5). Confusion, slippage, and a rather subjective postmodern sense of what constitutes racial or ethnic identity are the markings of a nation of destabilized notions when it comes to race and identity. Even though this scorekeeping, this counting, is obviously not scientific, nor is it in any way objective, it is often treated as such, whether it is for politically motivated statistics, medical research, data for redistricting, or crime statistics according to race. Gregory Rodriguez notes that

the abolition of racial data is as likely to eradicate the national obsession with race as widespread racial monitoring will make Americans less race-conscious. A frontal assault on race statistics could also provoke the opposite reaction, reinforcing the very demographic categories that racial privacy advocates believe already hold too much sway over American life. (5)

If whiteness remains the norm, if whiteness itself is not broken down into ethnic categories, as in the census and in racial profiling, whiteness remains falsely stabilized, while other racial and ethnic identities are destabilized. Perhaps it is true then that, as Andy Goffey writes, “difference is something that no amount of representation, no amount of mediation by subjective consciousness, will ever manage to pacify, and the inconvenience with which any ethics has to deal is precisely that” (65). Perhaps Americans wish to sidestep the issue by embodying cyberfantasies as nonracially marked cyberspecies in such video game-styled feature films as *Tomb Raider* (2001), and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001). Nevertheless, the synthesians appear to be white, thus explaining the casting of Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in the film version of *Tomb Raider*. For all of the talk of the computer age as a time in which we can fool around with subjectivity, pretend to be other races and genders, or embody Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “body without organs” (149), it seems as if our cyberworlds are populated mostly by white peoples’ mirror images.

The world of cyberidentity isn’t all that different from the real world, as is clear in the recent rise of egg-donation “services” on the Internet. In “Eggs for Sale,” a profile of the new business of human egg marketing, author Rebecca Mead follows the life of a Columbia Law School student who sells her eggs. The woman is described as a “nice girl: she doesn’t drink, she doesn’t smoke, she doesn’t take drugs, she’s pretty and quick to

laugh, and she has a lovely singing voice” (56). Without even being told, we *know* she is a white woman because it is not our custom to mark white women as such, only nonwhite women get marked in our white-centric culture. But just in case we missed that nonmarking, we learn of this woman’s success at donorship. “On both occasions, she had been selected as a donor immediately, no doubt because she is fair and blue-eyed and has a good academic record” (56). In this description whiteness and class are denarrated. In other words, they are not narrated, but they are assumed. She who is fair and blue-eyed is obviously white, though it is unstated. The reference to the academic record implies both class significance and the assumption of privilege and intelligence. If the donor were an African American, she would be clearly marked and labeled as either black or African American.

Feminists have long struggled with the tendency to conflate *woman* with identity as *white woman*. Such exclusionary practices have been scrutinized most clearly by black feminists and by postcolonial scholars who note that, as a group, the term *women* often connotes only a group of white women. This phenomenon is omnipresent in American culture. A recent article in *Esquire* on the patenting of genetic materials is pointedly accompanied by a two-page spread of a blond, white, nude woman, and, on the cover of the magazine, another airbrush-perfect white woman coyly poses holding one arm across her breast, while her other arm carefully covers her vagina. The article explores the manner in which the U.S. Patent Code covers genetic material, but it is clearly presented as a narrative of alarm and titillation for the presumably male readership of *Esquire*. The blurb before the article is meant to disturb the viewer as he is confronted with the display of the nude white female body.

The U.S. patent code was never meant to cover your genes, your cells, your blood, or the marrow in your bones. But it does. And Craig Venter’s map of the human genome was never meant to lead to the kind of great gene rush that is taking place as you read this. But it has. And the worst thing is, it’s too late for you to do anything about it. You’ve already been sold. (Hylton 103)

This material appears in a box, much like the surgeon general’s warning appears in a cigarette ad. The object of pleasure (white woman/cigarette) is ruptured by the display of the warning (your genes have been sold/cigarettes kill). The essay itself, by Wil S. Hylton, is a brilliant

exposé of the history of genetic patenting. Human genes are being patented, as are gene sequences and mice for cancer research. The colonization of bodies, a remnant of the culture of slavery, is going on with the aid of the Supreme Court, which in a number of decisions has ruled in favor of various genetic companies. It is clear that we do not own our own genetic material, that we are all, in a sense, owned by science. What surprises Hylton most, however, is the public's relative silence on the matter, even as it acquiesces to a new order of biological determinism that is ruled by economics and, to a large extent, existing racial prejudice (160).

Underscoring the artificiality of "whiteness" as a construct is the work of the Human Genome Project, which seeks to map the vast human genetic fabric. Not surprisingly, the project is a controversial one, even within the small group of scientists who are conducting the research. As Nicholas Wade outlines the ethical problem facing the National Human Genome Research Institute, the central question facing the researchers is whether one ethnicity is more predisposed to certain types of diseases than others.

With the decoding of the human genome largely complete, government scientists are beginning to construct a special kind of genetic map that would provide a shortcut to locating variant human genes that predispose people to common diseases.

The question the scientists face is whether that map should chart possible differences that may emerge among the principal population groups, those of Africans, Asians and Europeans. (17)

The director of the institute, Dr. Francis Collins, hopes to create a genome map "in a fashion that benefits human kind and doesn't unwittingly do damage to one population or another" (qtd. in Wade 17). And yet, as another researcher associated with the project, Dr. Eric S. Lander, commented, while "we must make sure the information is not used to stigmatize populations[,] . . . we have an affirmative responsibility to ensure that what is learned will be useful for all populations. If we shy away and don't record the data for certain populations, we can't be certain to serve those populations medically" (qtd. in Wade 17).

Though these scientists are concerned about the potential marginalizing effects of their research upon certain factions of the world's populace, they also hold out the possibility of a fascinating trump card—that