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 Trester 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 McClinstock, 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 ...' (McClinstock, 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).
Soap symbolized this 'racializing' of the domestic world and 'domestication' of the colonial world. In its capacity to cleanse and purify, soap acquired, in the fantasy world of imperial advertising, the quality of a fetish-object. It apparently had the power to wash black skin white as well as being capable of washing off the soot, grime and dirt of the industrial slums and their inhabitants - the unwashed poor - at home, while at the same time keeping the imperial body clean and pure in the racially polluted contact zones 'out there' in the Empire. In the process, however, the domestic labour of women was often silently erased.
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 ethology, 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.

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).
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'. 