

WHITENESS

MARTIN LUND



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MARTIN LUND

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SERIES FOREWORD

The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series offers accessible, concise, beautifully produced pocket-size books on topics of current interest. Written by leading thinkers, the books in this series deliver expert overviews of subjects that range from the cultural and the historical to the scientific and the technical.

In today's era of instant information gratification, we have ready access to opinions, rationalizations, and superficial descriptions. Much harder to come by is the foundational knowledge that informs a principled understanding of the world. Essential Knowledge books fill that need. Synthesizing specialized subject matter for nonspecialists and engaging critical topics through fundamentals, each of these compact volumes offers readers a point of access to complex ideas.

INTRODUCTION

This book was written at a rare time. In summer 2020, global white public discourse came close to acknowledging that the workings of what some of us call whiteness is essential knowledge. Following the mass protests against police brutality and white supremacy that arose after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, and the backlash against them, whiteness briefly became a topic of white public concern. Demonstrations in solidarity with oppressed Black US Americans took place in many other countries, often in protesting police brutality, systemic racism, and white supremacy in those contexts too.¹ Movements were born, organizations were formed, solidarity was proclaimed, and books were sold. Some white people were talking about whiteness.

Even before the waves of protest rippled across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic had convinced some

white people who hadn't thought much about it before that their social, cultural, political, and economic position might privilege them with forms of defense against as well as concern about vulnerability that weren't extended to many others. And when anti-Asian violence and racism grew even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, a Stop Asian Hate movement emerged, leading to more discussions in white spaces about white people's role in the marginalization and oppression of people of Asian heritage in many countries. Some white people were thinking about whiteness.

This wasn't unprecedented. The civil rights protests in the 1950s' and 1960s' United States attracted an international white gaze that could not help but focus on whiteness. International white outcry over South African apartheid in the latter half of the 1900s couldn't ignore the centrality of whiteness to that oppression.² Once the protest and opposition subsided, however, whiteness quickly receded from the international consciousness. The pattern is familiar. From the vantage point of mid-2021, it seems like it's happening again. Many white people are forgetting about whiteness.

This book is about whiteness, written for people who want to learn why it is important to keep talking about whiteness, keep thinking about whiteness, and not forget whiteness once it is no longer spotlighted in white public forums. It's about how whiteness is more than what we

sometimes see in the news. It's about an underlying cause of many global and local inequalities. It's about how what some of us call whiteness is created to begin with, how it changes, and how it serves to protect and privilege people who think we are white, or who are thought of as being white.³ As such, it needs to begin with a question: Just what the hell does “whiteness” mean?

Whiteness 101

The introduction hedges a bit. It speaks about “what some of us *call* whiteness” and “people who *think* we are white.” These phrasings should be thought of as implicitly permeating the rest of the book. They point to something central to any discussion of whiteness: whiteness doesn't exist, and there are no white people. Not really. Only people who are racialized as white. Rather, the point of departure for this book is that what some of us call whiteness is a racial formation that functions as a system of social control.

This definition will be unpacked more in the next chapter. For now it's enough to say that whiteness, as a racial designator, isn't a biological determinant of who and what people are but instead a social construction. Whiteness is not a quantifiable and inflexible fact of life, and not a scientific measure. Race, more than anything else, is about “making up people.” Thus like any word used to

describe a so-called race of people, “whiteness” only becomes meaningful in a social setting: it’s defined, interpreted, and categorized in historical and cultural contexts. The word “whiteness” doesn’t describe; it conjures into being. Whiteness is continually manufactured and sustained through language, laws, policies, science, representations in the news or popular culture and other media, and other channels. It is shaped and reshaped over time, through other ways of defining, interpreting, and categorizing who or what is to be thought of as white.

In this book, whiteness is not one single “thing” but rather a shifting master category. The term “whiteness” here designates a flexible cluster of historically, culturally, and geographically contingent ideals and standards. Whiteness isn’t primarily about skin color or phenotype. After all, so-called white people aren’t actually *white*. When I speak about whiteness, I speak about a system (or systems) of hierarchical classifications of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, cultural capital, mental, cognitive, and intellectual capabilities, and other fluid aspects of identity. Whiteness rhetorically dissolves social differences and fosters the illusion among people who are called white that we have more in common with each other than we do with anyone else.⁴

In thinking about whiteness, we cannot avoid thinking about norms. Norms are socially constructed expectations, rules, patterns of behavior, and values that are

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upheld socially. Norms are artificial, but they are often treated as if they are not. In large parts of the world, whiteness is positioned as the normative, normalized, supposedly neutral or natural subject position—the universal baseline for human experience—from which “difference” and “deviance” are measured. This means that in a sense, whiteness is also obscured to those who are counted as white. This relationship can be considered through the theoretical construct of “figure” and “ground.” In societies where whiteness is a dominant category, it can be viewed as the taken-for-granted ground on which, and in relation to which, other identity categories are given salience or figured.

One common way of framing this idea is to talk about the “invisibility” or “unmarkedness” of whiteness, even if it is not invisible as such. As media and cultural studies scholar and artist John Jennings points out, for example, “Growing up black, poor, and Southern made sure of my imperceptibility to the mainstream” in a world where the images available for consumption and self-creation were white.⁵ It is never rare or odd for white people to see white people in cultural products like films or books, or on TV, notes author Reni Eddo-Ledge: “The positive affirmations are so widespread that the average white person doesn’t even notice them. . . . To be white is to be human; to be white is universal. I only know this because I am not.”⁶ Whiteness is frequently all too visible to people of color,

who generally must understand it in order to navigate societies organized for white people and against those figured as nonwhite. But because whiteness is often positioned as normative, and although it is sometimes mobilized when it can lead to (for whites) desirable ends, it is more difficult to perceive for those who are racialized as white. Whiteness doesn't usually come into white people's field of vision because it is the bifocal, binocular, or whatever other suitable metaphoric ocular device through which we perceive the world. This is a result of what sociology professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "white habitus": "a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters."⁷

When differential relations exist between groups, advantaged groups often develop their own "groupthink," Bonilla-Silva continues—that is, their own values and norms to account for those differences.⁸ It follows that the greater the divergence from the ground—the dominant white norm in any given place and time—the more a group or person is figured to be different. This relation is made overly explicit in sociologist Nathan Glazer and politician and sociologist Daniel Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. While the authors' introduction claims that there is "no great significance" to the order of the book's chapters, it is difficult to credit their claim when

the next sentence sets up what appears to be a joke that hinges on racialized difference: “We begin, as the visitor might, with what immediately strikes the eye, and proceed from there.” Turning the page, what “strikes the eye” is the chapter heading: “The Negroes.”⁹

One benefit of the naturalization of whiteness is that it allows subjects to view themselves and be viewed as individuals first, rather than as member of groups. This is generally not a courtesy extended to those not considered white. Glazer and Moynihan’s book has no chapter about the “whites of New York.” That doesn’t mean that whiteness is static or monolithic. As the next chapter shows, the borders are always fluid. The boundaries of whiteness in different national or regional contexts continuously shift to admit or reject certain groups to maintain the structures of privilege and marginalization. Whiteness is also relational. It cannot exist without something, or several somethings, figured as nonwhite. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom summarizes these two points:

Whiteness, the idea, the identity tethered in no nation of origin, no place, no gods, exists only if it can expand enough to defend its position over every group that challenges the throne. White is being European until it needs to also be Irish because of the Polish who can eventually be white if it means that Koreans cannot. For that situational dominance

to reproduce itself, there must be a steady pole. That pole is blackness.¹⁰

The history of whiteness in the United States is replete with examples of not-quite-white groups using the existence of Black people as a “stepping-stone” into whiteness, pointing out to the cultural center that “whatever else we may be, we’re not Black.” Similar stories have played out elsewhere, with some being whitened by the emergence or entrance of other, ostensibly less white groupings in the national demographics. Still, being figured as not white isn’t the same as being figured as Black. While Islamophobia and anti-immigrant xenophobia directed at people of Middle Eastern–North African heritage are both common in Sweden, anti-Black or *afrofobiska* (Afrophobic) hate crimes are the most common form of hate crime, and many white Swedes continue to vocally defend the free use of the N-word whenever it is publicly debated. For that reason, and because the introductory genre necessarily must simplify, Blackness and whiteness function as the main “poles” in this book.

Whiteness also cannot be discussed without reference to racism. What racism means, however, is less straightforward than many of us think. One common and widely held definition of racism frames it as interpersonal, rooted in the belief that some groups are inherently different from and inferior or superior to others, and the individual

attitudes, acts, and speech that follow from this belief. This book isn't primarily concerned with interpersonal racism but instead with racism as something structural, institutional, and systemic. Structural racism can be interpersonal in expression, but it is also, and more important, embedded in social, cultural, financial, and political institutions as well as norms, habits, stereotypes, prejudices, conventions, and practices. These aspects and others undergird a racial power structure that puts one group at a particular advantage while disadvantaging other groups. Structural racism doesn't require an ideology or particular attitude to be upheld as long as it's taken for granted. It's also impossible to opt out of a racist structure. It permeates every aspect of social life, affecting everybody whether we want it to or not. Being white—that is, being positioned as “white” according to a society's formations of “race”—does not mean that one is racist in the interpersonal sense. But it does mean that one is the beneficiary of a racist social order to some extent.

There is not, nor has there ever been, a singular “white” group. Who fits the description isn't uniform across time and space, and is contested across geography in any given era. Whiteness, then, is not so much about “white” bodies as it is about power. The critical term “whiteness” has been slowly emerging over the span of nearly two centuries as a focal point for discussion and activism in large part due to the work of people of color, especially Black US Americans

for much of this time. With each passing year, more ways of talking about, thinking about, and remembering the shifting construction of whiteness appear, making it easier to critique, oppose, and perhaps eventually dismantle the global, regional, and local social orders that privilege whiteness as well as effect social control along racial lines.

Briefly about This Book

Whiteness is intended to serve as a way into a critical understanding of whiteness. As an introduction, it summarizes and synthesizes existing writing, and should not be viewed as a replacement for reading other work. A few words about the framing and limits of this book are thus in order. I write much about the cultural aspects of whiteness, but whiteness is always a project of racial domination. The ideas attached to whiteness have concrete effects. Those ideas are apprehended through representations. Representations help uphold domination and its effects. I discuss both structure and representation because they need each other to exist. Similarly, while I sometimes speak of whiteness in terms of knowledge, knowledge and ignorance about whiteness are always a matter of power. Ignorance isn't primarily an individual phenomenon; it's epistemic.

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Similarly, although I look at other national contexts, I use more examples from the United States and Sweden than anywhere else. Not only are these countries the most familiar to me, but they differ in their public images and relations to race. US public discourse consistently takes race into account, and the United States is internationally viewed as a racist country. Sweden, on the other hand, is self-positioned as color-blind, has largely discarded the term “race,” and is viewed internationally as progressive and equal. These differences make for fruitful comparisons. Yet it is important to remember that I am speaking about two different national formations of whiteness.

Since this book is intended to introduce a topic too complex to easily summarize or present in a neat way, I concentrate on the tip of the proverbial iceberg with the aim of making whiteness more legible to more people. The introduction genre has limits and necessitates a limited presentation of any topic. I’ve written this book half expecting to fail; these few pages cannot account for all the ways whiteness has been and continues to be constructed, lived, and enforced, nor can they satisfy every expectation of an introduction to whiteness. My hope is that whatever my failures may be, they aren’t harmful.

The more the picture I’m outlining comes into focus, the clearer it will become that I offer only a sketch. *Whiteness* should thus be viewed as a starting point, not a comprehensive accounting of everything whiteness is, has

been, and will be. For accessibility, I have opted wherever possible to cite more widely available sources in the body of the text. Scholarly monographs and articles can add much to this discussion, but specialized books are often expensive, and academic articles tend to be behind a pay-wall and prohibitively priced. Readers who want to continue learning about whiteness, its roots and effects, and the damage it can do to both those who aren't granted its privileges and those who are will find some suggestions for further reading at the end of the book.

Finally, my aim is not to level moral accusations when I speak about “white people”; the impetus is not to foster a “hatred of whites” or construct an argument in favor of so-called reverse racism. The point of looking critically at whiteness as a system or structure is not to paint white people as hateful monsters but rather to highlight patterns that have been in place since long before I or anybody reading this book were born, and that in all likelihood will remain long after we're dead, so as to help issue a necessary challenge.

Briefly about the Author

All scholarship is political. It is important to not get lost in the myth that science is somehow above the fray and neutral. Every scholar writes from a sociocultural subject

position and with a certain perspective, informed by previous experiences and prior knowledges. I therefore want to attempt, briefly, to lay out where I'm speaking from.

When I write that it's impossible to stand to the side of whiteness and structural racism, I include myself among those caught inside a structure not of my own making. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, and fairly young man with stable employment in the professional class. I am, in short, privileged by many of the structures that shape life in my native Sweden, where I live and work at a state-funded university. And I'm privileged in the United States from the moment I deplane, whether I've come for a brief visit—which I did annually before the pandemic, not least to see my wife's family—or to stay for years, as I did for three years in New York City for a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council.

In the structural sense of the word, I am also racist; it's not my choice, but it's how I was raised. Not by my mother. Not by my brothers. Not intentionally. I grew up in a society permeated with racism in the things I watched and listened to, in the things I read, in my schooling—first in the mostly white village where I grew up, then at a mostly white high school in a then mostly white city, and thereafter at a mostly white department of religious studies at Lund University, all in southern Sweden—and so on. I could go through my undergraduate courses in religious

studies and begin doctoral work in Jewish studies without ever encountering critical discussions of whiteness. My life until that point had been one of white segregation, with few exceptions, or nearly a textbook example of socialization into a white habitus. Because I have learned to view the world and move within it according to certain frameworks, it's unsurprising that I have said and done racist things, and that I will continue to do so. For much of my life, while I styled myself as nonracist and opposed explicit interpersonal racism, I remained unaware of how deeply favored I was in my every endeavor through no work of my own. For much of my life, I've let a racist structure stand unaddressed and unopposed.

I am working at being more aware of the harms I do, and to make them fewer and further between. I am working to address and oppose the racism that is everywhere around me. I can never be not racist, but I'm trying nevertheless to be antiracist. I'm trying with my teaching, what I choose to support and consume, where I spend or donate my money, who I vote for and support, and with works like this book, through my writing. I don't write this because I feel like I deserve a medal or want to style myself as "one of the good ones." I don't and I'm not. I wouldn't have been able to make these changes if someone else hadn't pointed me in the direction of a critique of whiteness. My hope is that *Whiteness* can help others to undertake the same work and follow it, wherever it may lead.

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