

Learning Whiteness: Education and the Settler Colonial State
by Arathi Sriprakash, Sophie Rudolph and Jessica Gerrard, Pluto
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Written in an Australian context, *Learning Whiteness* demonstrates the political, social, and conditional impacts of settler colonialism in education. What is meant by *whiteness* are the “structural formations of racial domination tied to European colonialism” (p. 4), which are globally and socially reinscribed. The book depicts how education is not only the conductor of white settler colonialism but may also be the agent in its undoing.

The book is presented in three parts. In *part one*, the authors bring context to how education within Australia privileges Western ways of knowing, doing, and being. Drawing from Indigenous scholarships and heeding the voices of Indigenous peoples, positioning them in their rightful place as knowers (Watego, 2021), the authors detail the history of Australian education, founded on colonial settler education. In *part two*, we learn of the fundamentals of whiteness, through racial capitalism, and how this impacts materialities, knowledge and feelings. Underlying racial capitalism is the logic of expendable peoples and the Othering of certain populations (Bhattacharyya, 2018;

Cho & Corkett, 2022). The authors identify the ways in which affect and the power of tradition can fortify the white possessive whilst coddling its beneficiaries in the “white blanket of forgetfulness,” (p. 58), innocence, and ignorance. In *part three*, the authors *challenge* readers to unlearn whiteness, through relational, respective, and responsive responsibility.

The book addresses education’s role in perpetuating the fabricated superiority and inherent benevolence of whiteness. While understanding the concept of race as socially constructed, Sriprakash, Rudolph, and Gerrard detail the “ongoing practices of colonial violence and racial injustice” (p. 4). Emphasising the strength of positionality and the ongoing need for commitment to “hear the noise of settler-colonialism inside your head” (Kwaymullina 2020, p. 55), the authors reflect on their identities. Sriprakash, racialized as Brown, recalls the experiences of racism she had encountered in her formative years during “the era of supposed ‘happy’ multiculturalism” (p. 8), reminiscent of stories shared in Cho & Corkett (2022) regarding microaggressions and Othering. Rudolph and Gerrard are white women with backgrounds in racial education and social politics. The authors also emphasize that whiteness “is structural and it comes in all shades” (Fúnez, 2023).

Whiteness sells safety, normalcy, and tradition; yet it is deeply insecure, relying on constant reassurance through ongoing assertions of supposed cultural (and linguistic) superiority of Western civilization and Christian heritage. Despite the diversity of First Nations peoples, their cultures, and languages, imperialism is perpetuated in the classroom through a one-language-only approach, and students are expected to perform based on colonial and monolingual norms (Gaynor & Akay, 2020). While education often functions as a “hopeful project” in the colonial-settler state, it is also a violent one

(p. 48). The book appeals to readers who do not seek to hope themselves out of oppressive structures but endeavor to call in and call out how the marginalization of Black voices and bodies begins in and is perpetuated through schooling. On the terrains of material, epistemic, and affective social justice, acknowledging, understanding, and dismantling whiteness as institutions are rebuilt will pave the road ahead.

The authors have thoughtfully compiled a text that educates and compels its reader to contemplate and discuss the political and societal normalcy of the settler colonial state. However, we encourage readers not to expect a prescriptive list of instructions or a simple solution – which is a good thing. Instead, what the authors offer is a provocation to reckon with and counter the injustices of learned whiteness within education. The narrative throughout reflects complex issues that have seldom been addressed within the literature in Australia. Why? Despite the ongoing impacts of racism (Moodie et al., 2019; Watego, 2022), there is a deep reluctance to talk about racism in Australia.

Learning Whiteness contests the ways in which “the shine and shadow of colonial modernity” (p. 56) are understood and its ongoing impact on educational constructs within Australia. We advise readers to consider this text to be a continuation of the conversation, rather than an answer with resolution. The two-word term, learned whiteness, may be a hard pill to swallow for readers who are not used to being defined or described by their race, but it is one that must be digested if we are to have bold, expansive conversations that *invite* decolonized and reparative futures.

We encourage readers to sit with “the tensions of hope and violence in education” (p. 55) and to consider, as Watego (2021) asserts, how hope does nothing for Blackfullas in the colony. Watego (2021) positions hope as “a psychological tool of the coloniser to insist that we accept things the way they are, forevermore”, to accept “an existence

predicated upon waiting passively for our humanity to be seen” (p. 198). As such, *Learning Whiteness* provides a timely analysis of education and the role that educators play in either being inhibitors or contributors to Black emancipation. This book is a call for those in the academy to grapple “with the complexity and pervasiveness of learning whiteness” (p. 86). The book is a provocation to show up and bring about bold change beyond do-nothing people, do-nothing behaviours, saviourism, and those who enact modern-day versions of discovery doctrine (Kwaymullina, 2020).

In Australia, whiteness has produced educational institutions that elevate opportunities for those who choose to perform to it. We enter dangerous grounds when we start to believe that the structures of whiteness are permanent and irrevocable. We are all invited to tend to whiteness. Yet, the fragile power of whiteness can be sustained or subverted in how we choose to listen (Kwaymullina, 2020) and respond. Also important are recognitions of joy and Black flourishing, fullness, and resistance. Because despite the attempts at dispossession, Blackfullas continue counter this, most notably in the claim of “‘still here’, a short-form way of saying ‘sovereignty never ceded’” (Watego, 2020, p. 46).

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