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Excerpt

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1 The Logic of White Literary Taste

In a 2021 interview with Camha Pham in *Liminal*, author and editor Radhiah Chowdhury said:

I'll come out and say that they've [publishing houses] *always* been hostile places for FNPOC [First Nations, people of colour] writers. However much goodwill there may be for a writer of colour, this ecosystem *is not built for us*, and at some point in the life of a book, an FNPOC writer is going to come up against a wall of whiteness that will leave a mark. I guarantee it.

(Chowdhury in Pham 2021, original emphasis)

This statement highlights the reality of being a First Nations person or a person of colour working in the contemporary publishing industry. Despite the often well-meaning diversity and inclusion initiatives in the publishing sector, it remains an exclusive and exclusionary site of cultural production. I am particularly struck by the image that Chowdhury conjures with the notion that the pervasive Whiteness¹ of the publishing industry will inevitably 'leave a mark', conveying both the unavoidability of working within White publishing structures in places like Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, and the effects or impact of these structures on people of colour, and their work.

White Literary Taste Production in Contemporary Book Culture interrogates the circulation of books through contemporary culture to examine the role that Whiteness has as a foundational principle of tastemaking. This book builds the case that the Anglophone publishing sectors in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States

¹ Throughout this book, I capitalise all colours that are used to describe a race (e.g. Black, White). The capitalisation of 'B' in Black has been adopted as common practice (see, for example APA Style 2022), however, I have also chosen to capitalise the 'W' in White in order to situate Whiteness as a race and challenge the historically manufactured neutrality or invisibility of Whiteness in understanding issues around race, dominance and power (Appiah 2020; National Association of Black Journalists 2020; Painter 2020).

operate according to the logic of White tastemaking where a binary assumption of who is or is not an author, and who is and is not a reader structures all practice. This is a syllogistic logic with an established structure of classification. Within this structure, an author is assumed to be White and a reader (or the audience for books) is assumed to be White. Practice within contemporary book sectors is occurring, often unconsciously, from this baseline. The existence of this logic can be seen in the pervasive and enduring inequality that defines the publishing industry in many places.

Through a study of women's literary prizes and the sharing of #AntiRacistReadingLists on social media, this book will explore the resilience of Whiteness in the publishing sector, and how this resilience perpetuates the exclusion of First Nations authors, Black authors and authors of colour from Anglophone book culture.

From some vantage points, the worldwide Black Lives Matter movement appears to have brought about a much needed and long awaited racial reckoning within the predominantly White Anglophone publishing sector. Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, attention to the relationship between race and the cultural industries intensified, leading to statements from majority-White institutions about #BlackLivesMatter and racial diversity within the publishing sector (Reid 2020). A week after Floyd's death, publisher Faber & Faber tweeted a thread with a list of books, starting with: 'In solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement we've pulled together a range of important books to help educate on racism and white privilege and what you can do to help enact change' (Faber Books 2020).

Faber & Faber's tweet thread is consistent with the tenor of the public communications coming from publishing houses during this time and illustrates the Anglophone publishing industry's increasing appetite for books by Black authors and authors of colour following world-wide Black Lives Matter protests. Speaking with *SBS News*, Bundjalung editor Grace Lucas-Pennington said that they:

saw huge demand from readers and from publishers, and that's going to have a knock-on effect for the next generation of writers ... Black writing is important to me because we've always been here. We've always been telling our

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stories, but they weren't getting published at the same rate as mainstream authors. (Lucas-Pennington quoted in Maunder 2021)

In addition to the promotion of books by Black authors and authors of colour, publishing houses in the United States participated in a 'day of action in solidarity with the uprisings ... in response to the long history of the state-sanctioned murder of Black people' (Verso Books 2020) on 8 June 2020, and publishing houses across the globe made numerous non-specific commitments to change and to increasing 'diversity' (Viltus 2020). These statements about change and tweets about resources for interrogating structural racism do represent a shift in the ways that the publishing sector has traditionally approached issues of race and diversity. While there were some well-publicised appointments of Black women into high-profile roles in major conglomerate publishing houses (Reid 2020), beyond this there appears to have been little meaningful systemic change in the industry.

The issues that define Black Lives Matter protests within the publishing sector have, as Chowdhury (2021) observes, always existed. In her 1992 monograph, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison explores the relationship between American literary criticism, literary reception and race. In articulating the foundational principles of the American literary field, Morrison uncovers the ways in which these principles and the structures they uphold intersect with the critical reception of literary texts. Morrison writes:

I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as 'knowledge'. This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. (Morrison 1992, 4)

In the thirty years since *Playing in the Dark* was published, there has been little change in the relationship between race and the literary field, or any revision to the assumptions around knowledge production, race and cultural circulation that Morrison (1992) describes. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests are perhaps one of the first times that major publishing houses and cultural intermediaries have, across the board, publicly grappled with the role that racism plays in perceptions and assumptions around authority, knowledge production and notions of legitimacy. Richard Jean So calls this ‘cultural redlining’, a practice that results in a cultural field wherein ‘white authors exercise a distinct racial command over minority authors, particularly Black novelists’ (So 2021, 3). So notes that ‘Cultural redlining, much like economic redlining, does not happen at the level of the individual writer, page or text. It happens at a cognitive scale well beyond what a single person can observe or read’ (So 2021, 6). What So is describing here is the overwhelming force of Whiteness, a logic that structures activities in book culture, influencing production, circulation and reception.

Echoing Morrison’s articulation of cultural industry assumptions, the prevailing theme that runs through Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente’s ‘Re:Thinking “Diversity” in Publishing’ (2020) report is the notion that publishing professionals have well-developed assumptions around who reads books and who should be writing them. The report’s findings, which emerge from interviews with 113 publishing industry professionals, demonstrate how the industry works to serve a ‘core audience’ of White, middle-class readers, and how questions around the perceived ‘quality’ of authors of colour pervade conversations around acquisitions. This is the logic of White taste: who is/is not an author, who is/is not a reader. When conversations around acquisitions and authors of colour are tied to questions of quality, the assumption within the logic of White taste that authors are White is reinforced. Similarly, if the primary audience for books is assumed to be White, books *for* White audiences is the core business.²

² For a detailed discussion of the role of ‘comps’ and the ways in which this acquisition practice perpetuates the Whiteness of the industry, see McGrath (2019).

These two findings, among others, illustrate the rigidity of White supremacy in the contemporary publishing sector, and the difficulties of transforming systems rooted in racist ideals. We can see this theme echoed in Radhiah Chowdhury's report into diversity in the Australian publishing sector. Chowdhury (2021) writes, 'Assumptions of audience are why any attempts to make mainstream publishing more inclusive cannot solely rely on a handful of diversity initiatives or focus on one aspect of the publishing foodchain.' I linger here on these assumptions around audiences and authors that Chowdhury and Saha and van Lente identify because it is these assumptions – and the network of associated perceptions that stem from and intersect with them – that are the focus of this book.

In this book, I interrogate the role that the logic of White taste plays in contemporary book culture. So (2021, 14) contends that 'Whiteness constitutes a driving force in the articulation of canonical American fiction'. Extending this idea, I contend that more than a driving force, Whiteness is a defining feature of publishing practice in many Anglophone contemporary publishing industries, particularly in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada and informs a logic against which activity is performed.

There is a strong corpus of contemporary research that examines the effects of Whiteness in contemporary publishing (see, for example, Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's (2019) work into young adult fiction and authors of colour; Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente's (2022) work into diversity efforts and their effects and, Richard Jean So's (2021) research on race and the American canon), research that demonstrates the ways in which authors and readers of colour are consistently sidelined and marginalised by the industry and those who work within its confines. The contribution that this book makes to this field of research is an examination of not only the dominance of White individuals within the industry but also the dominance of Whiteness as the logic that informs cultural tastes in book culture. Coming from the perspective of the circulation of book *culture* – as opposed to the production of books themselves – I seek to identify and analyse this logic in practice. In exploring the notion of a White logic of literary taste production, the

ontology of logic is difficult to avoid. At their most basic, the laws of non-contradiction, of identity and of the excluded middle (Olson 2007, 551) tell us a lot about the ways in which a logic of White taste production might operate within the contemporary publishing sector: all things can be classified as either inside or outside of a group leaving little room for nuance or intersectionality. The logic of White taste primarily classifies an author as White and a reader as White. Author and readers who fall outside this classification are understood to be nested in a sub-classification: a Black author, a reader of colour. Moreover, the ubiquity of this logic in both the systems that organise information and traditional scholarly pursuits means that it is embedded into the fabric of publishing and contemporary book culture.

Efforts towards Diversity

Progress towards change can often be perceived as linear, a perception that assumes, for example, representation for racial minorities within spaces dominated by White people is stronger today than it was a decade ago. This assumption around the nature of progress is misguided and reveals a perception of the inertia of progress that does not exist. For example, sporadic interventions into the publishing industry aimed at establishing greater equality for women authors have brought about meaningful but short-lived gains, establishing a picture of progress that is defined by peaks and troughs as opposed to sustained growth (Dane 2020c, 83). Research into the representation of authors of colour in the British publishing sector reveals that there were more authors of colour published in Britain in 2006 than there were in 2016 (Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 107). Ramdarshan Bold's work suggests that regression might have occurred because from the early-2000s, 'publishers now had a small pool of established authors of colour to draw from', and were not working to nurture and develop new authors of colour beyond this core group (Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 107). This phenomenon is echoed in So's study of the US publishing sector, where he describes the ways in which individual authors of colour 'join the ranks' of the literary elite, to the exclusion of others: 'when literary gatekeepers admit Black authors into the literary 1 percent, they do so with very specific rules of inclusion. They will only distribute their attention in highly unequal terms' (2021, 82). We

see through these two examples that progress towards equality is non-linear because of the ways in which the ‘literary elite’ or ‘gatekeepers’ work to retain the power of the dominant group. The inertia at play within this cultural sector is not towards equality, rather, towards inequality. This, in turn, raises questions around the role that efforts to bring about equality, or at least increase diversity play in today’s publishing sector.

It is worth examining the attempts individuals and organisations have made to establish equality in the publishing sector, and explore why these attempts often do not bring about the systemic change they seek. Statements around diversity and inclusion are a common presence on the websites of multinational publishing houses, many offering a commitment to increasing the diversity of the publishing workforce. For example, Penguin Random House US’s (2021) ‘Diversity, Equity & Inclusion’ webpage details the myriad initiatives the company supports in order to transform the entrenched inequalities of their company and the industry more broadly. The site states:

Establishing more inclusive business practices – including reflecting the diversity of our world in our staff – is a necessity for us to help build an inclusive society. For us, more diverse publishing is not just a moral imperative ... We will increase the number of books we publish – and promote, market, and sell – by people of color. (Penguin Random House 2021)

Hachette UK adopts a similar, albeit more specific, approach to equality and diversity in their organisation, saying: ‘We have been voluntarily publishing our ethnicity pay gap since 2019 and pledged a representation target of 15% of the total group workforce for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic talent within five years’ (Hachette 2021). What is clear from these two examples is that publishing houses are cognisant of the fact that, for example, 87 per cent of the UK’s publishing workforce is White (Publishers Association 2020), a statistic that is replicated in other national contexts (Chowdhury 2021). What is unclear from these statements is the role that the logic of White taste plays in both the industry’s glaring inequalities and in the ways in which equality will be brought about. I argue that this omission serves a purpose.

In their research examining the limitations and the realities of diversity efforts in book production and contemporary publishing, Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente (2022, 1808, 1813, 1815) observe the ways in which efforts to establish a more inclusive or diverse publishing industry in the United Kingdom consistently fail to achieve their aims. They write, ‘Diversity is effectively mobilised on the terms of Whiteness, which simultaneously commodifies and marginalises narratives around race’ (Saha and Lente 2022, 1806). Saha and van Lente go on to note that, ‘this is a central feature of the publishing industry, which operates to sustain privilege as much as to make profit’ (2022, 1806) complicating the industry-wide assumptions around the power of diversity and inclusion efforts to bring about meaningful change. This complication targets not simply the diversity and inclusion efforts themselves but interrogates how these initiatives: obscure the root cause of inequality; uphold Whiteness as the dominant standard against which diversity is understood; and, render equality as a commodity. Saha and van Lente’s research shows how publishers, throughout the publishing process, continually reinforce the dominance of Whiteness. Thinking about this in the context of Penguin Random House’s (2021) statement on diversity and inclusion, I argue that the conglomerate publisher seeks to establish more inclusive business practices and commits to publishing more authors of colour, under the assumption that these acts will bring about the ‘inclusive society’ they seek to promote. This statement positions the publishing house itself as the benevolent White force to bring about change, without even entertaining the possibility that this dominance could be or should be challenged.

This White dominance influences all facets of book culture and is rooted in established ideas about legitimacy and authority. There exists a relationship between the notions of what constitutes legitimacy and the influence of Whiteness in the production of literary tastes. The cultural engagement among the most dominant groups within a society comes to define the notions of legitimate culture and legitimate cultural production (Bourdieu 1984, 280). Understood in the context of ‘race making’ that Saha and van Lente put forward helps us to see the complex and interactive system of Whiteness that underpins activities within publishing and contemporary

book culture, and the ways in which this system works to be and remain self-fulfilling.

Whiteness and the Acquisitions Process

Perhaps the clearest articulation of this system of dominance comes from the process of acquisitions in the publishing industry. The acquisition process is one that is cloaked in mystery and mythos, where proclamations around taste, ‘gut feeling’ and industry nous are foregrounded (Squires 2017). The process of ‘getting published’ – and the relationship between this process and race – is one that is examined in great depth by both Ramdarshan Bold (2019) and by Saha (2016). Ramdarshan Bold’s research highlights how publishers and editors (a group of professionals that are overwhelmingly White (Publishers Association 2020)) appear to consistently limit the kinds of books they publish from authors of colour. Despite apparent increasing demand for books written by authors of colour (Maunder 2021) this research indicates that authors of colour are expected to write about ‘issues’ that relate to race or conform to a particular stereotype or narrative (Ramdarshan Bold 2019, 114–15). It appears that the individuals who are commissioning new works of fiction and non-fiction lack the imagination to perceive that authors of colour could or should write beyond a particular type of story. Whether this limited imagination is consciously or sub-consciously performed, it reveals the prevalence of a White taste logic that forms the foundation of decision-making. The development of point-of-sales technology that has facilitated a rise in ‘data-driven’ acquisition decisions has only worked to reinforce this logic (Saha 2016, 4). When the opportunities for authors are limited by the racialised imagination, and therefore acquisitions decisions, of publishers (Ramdarshan Bold 2019), the input data for point-of-sales software will result in sales data that ultimately supports these assumptions.

The way that perceptions of Whiteness, authority and legitimacy pervade acquisition decision-making processes, and the strength of this logic in the contemporary publishing sector, plays out in ways that are counter-productive to the economic imperatives and profit motives of commercial trade publishing. The industry-wide assumptions around who reads books

and who is best placed to write them, assumptions that work to support the dominance of White individuals and White structures in the publishing sector, place limitations on the potential profitability of books. Saha writes, ‘if capitalism were only concerned with profit, then it would be in the best interests of sales and marketing to stress the universal qualities of the cultural commodity rather than brand it according to race’ (Saha 2016, 11). This contradiction highlights the strength of the logic of White tastemaking and the ability for the logic to influence practices in a way that undermines a profit motive.

I take Saha and van Lente’s work into the ‘race making’ of the contemporary publishing sector as the foundation for this study into the notion of Whiteness and taste in book culture. Rather than focus on the production side of the publishing industry, my work largely examines the culture that surrounds a book post-publication and the ways in which Whiteness underpins taste production. Through this examination, I demonstrate the rigidity of White literary taste production and how this tastemaking force reverberates through the industry. Through two case studies – women’s literary prizes and anti-racist reading lists shared on social media – I contend that the logic of White taste operates in both conscious and sub-conscious ways to continually establish and re-establish White dominance in book publishing and book culture.

Structure of the Book

Interrogating the logic of White taste in this volume starts in Chapter 2 ‘Legitimacy, Value and Power’ with an exploration of the foundational principles that inform the structures of contemporary book culture. In this chapter I examine the principles upon which the contemporary publishing sector and the logic of White taste was established, and test this logic within the sub-fields of book criticism, and online and offline sales. In this chapter I offer the notion of practice–structure–practice (Bourdieu 1977) as the foundation for understanding the ever-perpetuating assumptions around what constitutes an author and bring these ideas into play with critical Whiteness studies. This chapter establishes the theoretical context for the two case studies that form Chapters 3 and 4.