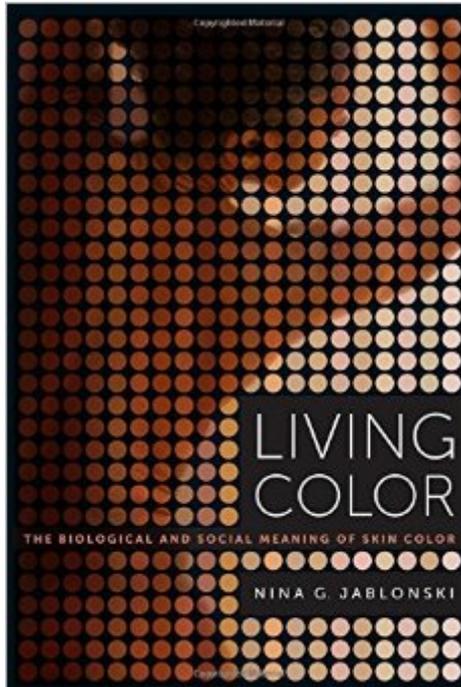


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# Living Color: The Biological And Social Meaning Of Skin Color



## Synopsis

Living Color is the first book to investigate the social history of skin color from prehistory to the present, showing how our body's most visible feature influences our social interactions in profound and complex ways. Nina Jablonski begins this fascinating and wide-ranging work with an explanation of the biology and evolution of skin pigmentation, tracing how skin color changed as humans moved around the globe, exploring the relationship between melanin and sunlight, and examining the consequences of mismatches between our skin color and our environment due to rapid migrations, vacations, and other life-style choices. Aided by plentiful illustrations, this book also explains why skin color has become a biological trait with great social meaning; a product of evolution perceived differently by different cultures. It considers how we form impressions of others, how we create and use stereotypes, and how prejudices about dark skin developed and have played out through history; including as justification for the transatlantic slave trade. Offering examples of how attitudes toward skin color differ in the United States, Brazil, India, and South Africa, Jablonski suggests that a knowledge of the evolution and social importance of skin color can help eliminate color-based discrimination and racism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Absolutely excellent and flawless. Nina Jablonski's "Living Color" should forever put to rest any arrogance, ignorance or self-serving arguments that breathe air into racism, racists of all colors, or any subtle justifications supporting or tolerating it. This should be a standard text in every college

and junior-senior year of high school that wants to genuinely educate and enlighten its students about humanity. Dr. Jablonski has authored an indisputable book on the obvious irrelevance of race and so-called racial differences, with great photos, illustrations and clear details. This book greatly enhances her "Skin Deep" lectures and documentaries on YouTube. Nevertheless, until much of human nature and racially socialized people discards this human weakness, we'll have to occasionally suffer from every knuckle-dragging knucklehead that believes they have an ounce of superiority or entitlement over other humans. Even in this 21st century, we're still on a disastrous race-based journey no matter how we disguise it through rhetoric, politics or politricks.

Have you ever tried to puzzle out for yourself how the human species got so focused on skin color and its meaning? More to the point, have you ever tried to discuss this question with friends and found yourself backtracking, disavowing prejudiced views, or just shutting down when nerves were struck and epithets started to fly? How much would you have given for a carefully researched and lucid exposition of how racial stereotypes developed historically over the centuries? Nina Jablonski's excellent new book *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* gives us the tools we need to think clearly about race. As a scientist (she is the Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at Pennsylvania State), Jablonski understands race to be purely a social construct, and she devotes the first half of her book to explaining the biological origins of skin color and the effects on human health of the diaspora from Africa. Much of this information is also ably conveyed in Jablonski's earlier book, *Skin: A Natural History*. The second half of *Living Color* tackles the harder issues of our responses to skin color. Humans are "highly visual" and mostly learn through imitation, Jablonski asserts. "We are hard-wired to be receptive to visual differences and responsive to the reactions of authority figures" and thus easily influenced to adopt the prejudices of our families and larger cultures (94). She incorporates fascinating studies to support her argument, including an experiment conducted by elementary school teacher Jane Elliott in 1968 (p. 95). Having established our tendency to attribute significance to skin color, Jablonski reminds us that we are not "neurologically predestined to be biased . . . [because] Our attitudes are constantly subject to change through experience and, importantly, conscious choice" (99). However, "Most people are not aware of the influence of stereotype on their own thought processes, and this lack of awareness . . . has had profound effect on human history" (102). The fascinating chapters that follow trace the development of the concept of human races and its often horrific influence on human behavior. Jablonski succinctly examines the histories of India, Egypt, the Mediterranean, Brazil, and the Islamic world to show how all peoples begin with the unexamined assumption that their own culture

is both the norm and the ideal. She traces the process by which this assumption, complicated by many factors, led to race being established as "an institutional fact" that made slavery possible [141]. I was surprised to learn that Immanuel Kant was "one of the most influential racists of all time," whose reputation as a philosopher gave his writings about the superiority of lighter-colored races inordinate influence (134). Sidebars document some of the most egregious justifications of slavery but also contemporary refutations by abolitionists. Throughout, Jablonski buttresses her historical discussion with citations from modern studies of the effects of racial attitudes. The historical chapters are followed by investigations into what color means in societies today. Tanning and skin lightening are considered in essays illustrated with photographs and depictions of advertising campaigns. In fact, the whole book benefits from well-chosen illustrations. Also commendable are the extensive end notes and bibliography. This excellent book should be widely read and influential. Jablonski puts her faith in human intelligence and our ability to incorporate new information and perspectives. Yet she is under no illusion about the struggle reason may have with entrenched and unexamined beliefs. "The diminishing of a human being on the basis of skin color lays bare the worst aspects of our visual orientation, suggestibility, imitateness, and status consciousness"(197). Fortunately for us, Jablonski has determined that, at least in the scientific community, "We live in an Enlightenment of color," (2) to which she contributes this clear-headed and profoundly encouraging book.

I love this book. It is not too over your head but breaks a lot of things down. This is the type of book and information I have been looking for. I am very interested in Social Psychology especially racial relations. This is the first stop on my journey! Love it!

With so many different hues of humans around. We have wondered in the past and now: How can there be so many shades? Where does skin coloring come from? Is it of great importance? Does skin color affect us today? Nina G. Jablonski explores this in her new book, "Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color". As a distinguished professor of Anthropology and named one of the first Alphonse Fletcher St. Fellows for her efforts to improve the understanding of color, Jablonski's words and her study on this topic is what drew me first. First, the book is broken down into two parts: Biology and Society. The biological aspect is explained in laymen can understand and answers the questions of where shades of color come from and where does skin come from specifically. According to Jablonski, "Although hemoglobin contributes to skin color, the most important substance...is melanin"(Jablonski, 2012, p. 10: Living Color). The melanin and

eumelanin, found below the skin reacts to exposure in the sun. So those born near the equator will be dark or at least tan and able to tan very well. The author goes very deep into pigmentation, faulty melanin radicals (albinism), and the reason why vitamin D deficiency occurs in those with paler skin- this was due to migration shifts and hunting for game leading humans into Eurasian colonies. In other words, we all began in Africa and then there was a spread of colonies and humans lightened or darkened according to biology and region. Moving from biology to society, the book gets interesting. In fact, if you are African American, African, or of another race with dark pigmentation, the information that flows can be disheartening and it makes you wonder how could intelligent species even think like that? For example, Immanuel Kant, a well known philosopher "was convinced that skin color denoted qualities of personality and morality"(134). He published books that Europeans read and took as law. He believed that if you are tanned or dark, something is wrong with you- as in your psychology, well being, morals, health, etc. Another writer/philosopher, Voltaire believed in polygenism- he postulated people came from Adam and Eve generally but where did Africans come from? I can say that Voltaire was just plain stupid or ignorant- either way, once again, many lighter skinned people took what he said as law as well. Other travel journals were written by explorers who never "explored" Africa at all, but came up with hilarious, frightening stories about "ape people" with large eyes and limbs and guess what? The Europeans bought that garbage as well. Jablonksi further explores how skin coloring affected the slave trade, modern tanning, and skin lightening problems we have today. It is much to go through and explain here, but after reading her book I am further convinced that there is only one way to cure racism- Love yourself and get to know people outside of the books. I rate this book 4.5 stars.

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