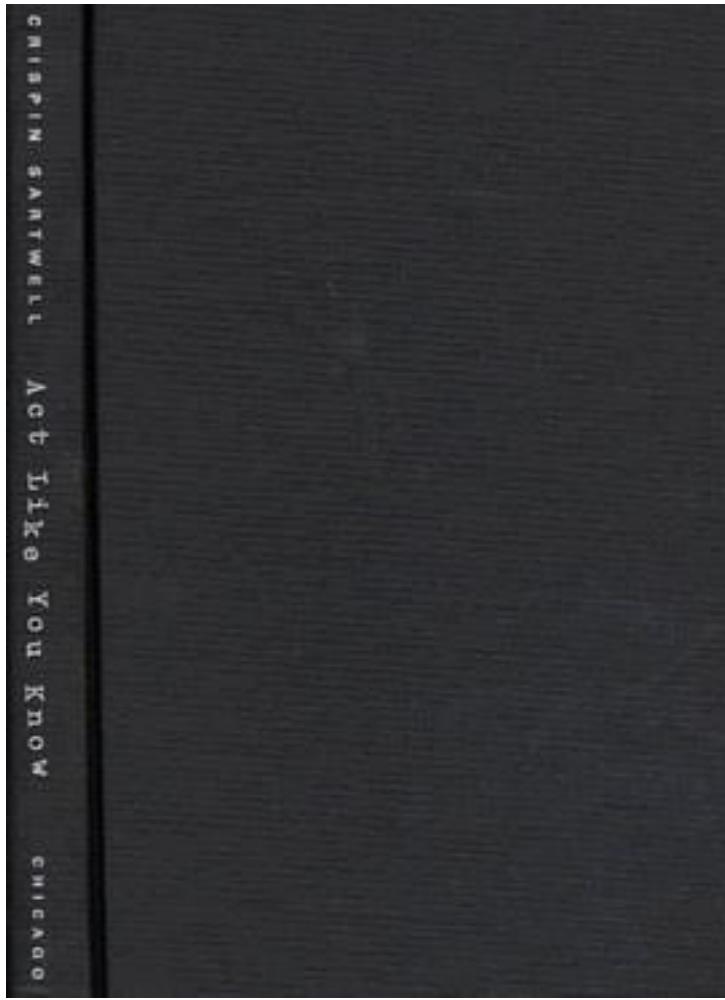


Act Like You Know



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Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X - their words speak firmly, eloquently and personally of the impact of white America on

the lives of African-Americans. Black autobiographical discourses, from the earliest slave narratives to contemporary urban raps, have each in their own way gauged and confronted the character of society. For Crispin Sartwell, as philosopher, cultural critic, and white male, these texts provide a rare opportunity of gaining access to the contents and core of white identity. There is, Sartwell contends, a fundamental elusiveness to that identity. Whiteness defines itself as normative, as a neutral form of the human condition, marking all other forms of identity as "racial" or "ethnic" deviations. Invisible to itself, white identity seeks to define its essence over and against those other identities, in effect defining itself through opposition and oppression. By maintaining fictions of black licentiousness, violence, and corruption, white identity is able to cast itself as humane, benevolent, and pure; the stereotype fabricates not only the oppressed but the oppressor as well. Sartwell argues that African-American autobiography perceives white identity from a particular and unique vantage point: one that is knowledgeable and intimate, yet removed from the white world and thus unencumbered by its obfuscating claims to normativity.

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