

THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS by Patricia J Williams, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, Harvard University Press, 1991, 263pp, ISBN 0674014751

It is a now common complaint by legal scholars that despite its purported objectivity, neutrality and rationality, law is an elaborate scheme of channels and gates which are manipulated to impose a false sense of order upon a chaotic and unjust world, by those whose power depends upon deflecting rather than accepting their own responsibility for that world. Few who make this observation, however, fail to betray it, either by implying a distance between themselves and what they have observed, or by offering alternatives to the existing system that merely replicate the deceptions so exposed. It is an observation to which lawyers will easily nod in understanding — the evidence, after all, is overwhelming — but those who nod somehow are able to maintain their understanding without upsetting their own basic complacency. Law is, after all, all that lawyers have.

The problem in confronting the proposition that law is a screen-like maze which rationalises the misery it helps to produce may be that efforts to do so have depended too heavily upon the methods and techniques of law itself — linear logic, application of formal rules, distinction of precedent, deductive reasoning, objectivity and neutrality, argument by analogy, and the like. Patricia J Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* tries something else: she abandons conventional forms of argument, including legal reasoning, and with bold self-consciousness and passionate irony, breaks every rule in the book. Rejecting conventional standards of academic detachment, she discloses her most intimate feelings and doubts, and even her own emotional instability.¹ While exposing the ignominy of her personal pain and confusion, she screams for recognition and respect.² Determined to confound the reader about what it means for something to be “true”, she repeatedly confuses fact and fiction.³ She seeks to create insight by leaving gaps in her presentation.⁴ She self-consciously defends her choice of methods while admitting that as a result of them, she has little credibility with the audience she most needs to reach.⁵

The Alchemy of Race and Rights is a powerfully written pastiche of images, stories, and angry tirades. Each story is presented in layers, the more complicated ones moving back and forth between the basic narrative, musings on the motives of the other actors in the story, a self-critique of Williams' role in the story, and an account of problems she has had in telling the story to others. In each case, the stories are meant to challenge some convention of thought, legal category, or unspoken assumption. In

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- 1 “I edit myself as I sit before the television. I hold myself tightly and never spill into the world that hates brown spills. I'm afraid that everything I am will pour out onto the ground and be absorbed without a word. I may disappear.” at 183.
 - 2 “I typed up as much of the story as I have just told, made a big poster of it, put a nice colorful border around it, and, after Benetton's was truly closed, stuck it to their big sweater-filled window.” Williams at 46.
“I stood tall and spoke loudly into their ranks: ‘I have my rights!’” Williams at 235-36.
 - 3 In “wonder[ing]” about her great-great-grandmother who was bought by a 35-year old white man, for example, Williams states, without possibility of contradiction or proof, that the purpose of the man's purchase was “to prove himself sexually as well as to increase his livestock of slaves”. Williams at 18.
 - 4 “Thus, in attempting to fill the gaps in the discourse of commercial exchange, I hope that the gaps in my own writing will be self-consciously filled by the reader, as an act of forced mirroring of meaning-invention.” Williams at 8.
 - 5 Williams at 19.

each case, the reader's attention is drawn most pointedly to the racial implications of the story, and in each case, although Williams speaks with a clear point of view, the reader is left to find her or his own meaning.

Williams' account of her discovery that her great-great-grandmother was a slave, purchased by her great-great-grandfather, a wealthy, white lawyer and Tennessee judge,⁶ sets some of the basic themes and methods of the book. Her mother uses Williams' lawyer-side heritage to boost her confidence as she sets off for Harvard Law School.⁷ At the same time Williams' slavery past, which other family members have used various means to escape, identifies her as "property", without will, without control, and without presence. This bivalent account grows in complexity, mutating as she seeks to pin down her identity through her own responses to various ordinary everyday events, television shows, news stories and family legends. Williams tells of her rage and humiliation at the refusal of a teenaged, gum-chewing teenager to buzz Williams through the security system of a New York City Benetton's during regular shopping hours.⁸ She juxtaposes an account of her revulsion at a well-dressed father lecturing his daughter about why it was inappropriate to give money to an "old beggar woman", along with her own rationalisation, minutes later, for why she should pay no attention to a homeless person lying on a bench in the subway, apparently dead.⁹ She turns a cold, self-critical eye upon her own silent complicity in an anti-Semitic exchange which paralyses her while she is shopping in another clothing store.¹⁰ In retelling the story of the Howard Beach assaults and the Tawana Brawley case, she cynically exposes the segregationist impulses which permeated the public reactions to these incidents.¹¹ She writes of her offence at the marketing of stylish, "frumpy" clothing in Manhattan ("Sale! Two-dollar overcoats. No bums, no booze.") which both exploit and disenfranchise the people who most need that clothing.¹² She speaks poignantly of her frustration at losing the respect of her students and colleagues, whose criticisms of her ironically serve to prove the very messages Williams is so unable to convey to them,¹³ and she ridicules the rejection of her work by editors whose desire for less "self-indulgence" and greater "objective commentary"¹⁴ mirrors the illusion of rationality and cohesiveness which is the principal target of Williams' critique.

To some, Williams' identity search will seem all too self-absorbed, solipsistic, and arrogant — a response which itself marks the narrow margins within which explorations of questions of race and property are expected to take place. What makes this search so powerful to others is the duplicity, or rather multiplicity, which Williams exposes in herself; it seems that Williams' search for her own identity patterns a hypothetical search for meaning in a society determined, like Williams, to hide from itself.

Woven into her tales of concrete, everyday events, Williams sifts her "schizophrenic" responses¹⁵ through many allegorical images. The most compelling of these, perhaps, is the image of polar bears. Polar bears are proud and fragile, fierce and gentle, smelly and pure, voracious and full, hunter and hunted, "naturally territorial" and "unfairly imprisoned".¹⁶ Polar bears appear in Williams' dreams or in

6 Williams at 17-19.

7 Williams at 216.

8 Williams at 44-48.

9 Williams at 27.

10 Williams at 126-29.

11 Williams at 58-72, 169-178.

12 Williams at 42.

13 Williams at 80-97.

14 Williams at 214.

15 Williams at 207.

16 Williams at 234.

newspaper stories or in speeches, as "markers" for experiences to which Williams may wish to return, symbols of those parts of herself she wants to own, disown, separate and reassemble.¹⁷

Williams is not just another postmodernist who writes about fragmentation and alienation. She brings postmodernism down to ground level by redescribing the world as if postmodernism were real, not just an intellectual game. To read this book is to walk in postmodern shoes, see with postmodern eyes, think with postmodern brain cells, and experience postmodern panic. Only occasionally does Williams float up into abstract jargon whose meaning will be indecipherable to all but the most posh and trendy intellectuals, and then, usually as a joke on herself.¹⁸ The main task she has set for herself is not to write about dispossession but to dispossess. In describing what we see and read about every day from her eyes, she dispossesses those who shield their own interests behind objective principles, including guilty liberals; she dispossesses those dimensions of her heritage which would attempt to dispossess any other dimensions of her heritage; ultimately, she seeks to dispossess the self which seeks dispossession.

Most readers will want to fight this book. It is a very threatening book. It drills into the neutral zone which ordinarily protects us from everyday chaos and injustice, a neutral zone maintained and policed by categories and concepts (including legal ones) that make that chaos and injustice appear rational and inescapable. Seeping through the holes, our experiences may blend together and produce new understandings which subvert the structures which have served so well to rationalise the status quo. The risks are substantial. If we know how much of our comfortable lives is at stake, will we really wish to end racism? If we, too, come to believe racism invisibly alchemises with law to pre-ordain even our most ordinary perceptions and responses, will we still think there is a point to our ineffective, self-defeating efforts to combat racism with mere legal reform?

Then again, if everyone who read this book gave in to it, it is not clear how bright the future for racism really would be.

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17 Williams at 207-09, 213, 234-35.

18 "'What's so new,' asks my sister, losing interest rapidly, 'about a schizophrenic black lady pouring her heart out about food stamps and polar bears?' I lean closer to her. 'Floating signifiers,' I whisper." Williams at 7.

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