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Strategy for Seeing White: Patricia Williams's Polar Bears

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Kwame Anthony Appiah speaks of blackness as a badge of insult: the African or African-American cannot escape. That is to say, the history of the degrading treatment of other peoples. Whites, too, wear a badge of insult, a history fraught with assumptions only partially acknowledged. This legacy is the badge of insult as a racial trope among tropes, a social construction among constructions.

EStein, from a variety of cultures and ethnic groups but that one could not presume assumptions of superiority and entitlement. It is possible, or, at least, it is necessary, to decenter one's vision in order to see whiteness not as norm but as an aberration, to see how blackness has been defined and degraded lives on the surface of the skin. Whites who chose the badge may defend the badge as a shield to the world of crime and violence, but the white badge of insult on their skin is nonetheless visible to others. Whites who choose to embrace this badge of insult, as defined by others, may experience that all who wear the badge have learned to suffer the world of their skin and those whose other skins are similarly marked.

Definitions of whiteness need to expose the prototrope of the white norm. Just as the Sioux must continue to resist the stereotype of the white norm which seeks to perpetuate their complicity in a future of racial dominance and conflict.

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we wear but see the continued power of the prototrope of normative whiteness and so feel disempowered. And yet I suspect we will not find the power to resist our normative status in a ventriloquism that gives a Laguna voice to a white face nor in a voyeurism that watches and waits. Making no claims for the pain of our racial identities other than that it is ours, I think we had better examine it.

One strategy for making explicit a racial identity so implicit is to read and listen to the definitions of whiteness employed by people with other racial identities for whom whiteness is less likely to be normative or implicit. Looking for books entitled The White Image in the Black Mind or White Skin, Black Masks, I read George Fredrickson's The White Image in the Black Mind or Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks. Although historian George Fredrickson writes of The White Image in the Black Mind, he contributes to my understanding of what I will call white consciousness by adding credence to the premise that whites' ideas about themselves, often projected through ideas about others, are at the core of racial conflict, at least within the United States. Evidence supporting this premise appears, for example, when he speaks of the waning colonization movement in the northern United States of the 1830s. (The colonization movement sought the removal of Negroes from slavery and from the United States and their establishment in a colony such as Liberia or sites in Central and South America.)

Fredrickson writes,

The controversy that then erupted in Northern reform circles was not, as is sometimes supposed, a dispute over the inherent capabilities of the Negro; as we have seen, prominent advocates of colonization often shared, in theory at least, the abolitionist belief that American Negro deficiencies were the result of a repressive environment. Rather it was a debate on the separate issue of whether white Americans could be expected to overcome their antipathy to blacks and achieve interracial equality and brotherhood. (28)

United States writers who are defined as ethnic minorities by their appearance or language or habits of being and who define themselves by actively speaking from and about that ethnic or minority identification enable a white reader to see her whiteness—its political and economic dominance, its inherent claims to normative judgments—being seen. Although these constructions of whiteness are not without their own instances of and reasons for stereotyping and hyperbole, they nonetheless provide the reader images and ideas of whiteness visible as such because removed from normative status.

Attorney Patricia Williams is one such writer. In her self-reflective, innovative, legal analysis, The Alchemy of Race and Rights, she weaves a web of logic and logic outre around the subjects of race and rights.

Williams' interest in whiteness is not pointed nor her examination of it systematic; the ambiguities of her text are all the more provocative. For they offer to the reader, as a medium of exchange, diverse and paradoxical emotions and ideas of a person experienced in the ways of a race-conscious society. Both the collage form and the diverse contents of Williams' book announce that race and rights are a complex, convoluted topic. Williams' treatment of this difficult topic demands that her text be closely read rather than categorized.

Specifically, in Williams' chapter, "On Being the Object of Property (a gift of intelligent rage)," she creates meaning through juxtapositions of different examples or anecdotes which range in purview from intimacy to legality. The effect—indeed, I suspect, the aim—of this process is to remove the distinction between what is private and what is public and thus to undermine the dispassionate objectivity claimed by the law and legal analyses. "On Being the Object of Property" begins with a story of Williams' departure for law school and her mother's reminder that "The Millers were lawyers, so you have it in your blood" (216). But legacies are troubling. Austin Miller was the slaveholder who owned and impregnated Williams' great-great-grandmother. Williams remarks, "Reclaiming that from which one has been disherited is a good thing. . . . Yet claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox" (217). From a variety of angles she probes this paradox. After her initial story, she moves to an anecdotal and statistical discussion of the sterilization of black, brown, and red women. She concludes from her information that one legacy for the individual from slavery "is a belief structure rooted in a concept of black (or brown or red) antwill" (219) and supposing "pure will" as nobility in a white person. She explains then that "pure will" signifies the whole personality in the bourgeois world view while "wisdom, control, and aesthetic beauty signify the whole white personality" in slave law (221). It is apparently the "pure will" of white nobility Williams' mother tells her to draw forth from her Miller blood, a will very useful in law school. But instead Williams finds, in her search for her roots, that she is the "irrationality, lack of control, and ugliness" of the whole slave or black personality as seen by the white slaveholder (221). Knowing, saying, that the ideologies of slavery and bourgeois life are fragmenting and fragmented does not spare Williams this absorption of the slave personality. She seems to be exhibiting black antwill.

Like the illiterate, pregnant, fifteen-year-old black girl whose mother recommends sterilization which had been suggested to her by a white doctor, Williams does not like to look white people in the eye. Williams' parents recommend to her that she do look all people in the eye, and thus they pass on the knowledge of the norms of "this culture." But, for
In her work, Williams provokes a rumination on commercial transactions and teaches us to see the images that are propagated, the more dizzying and diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society.

Williams' great-great-grandfather, the white lawyer, is also denied the inheritance of his flesh and blood and the rights they contain. The law's power to decide who will raise a child is a contract law, Williams' professional expertise. She notes that contract law renders a contract's signatories passive, granting only the document the power to act. The signatories, it would seem, are in the state of antiwill. The law's power to act is willed and antiwill.

So Williams returns to stories and to Marjorie, a storyteller herself. In her own way, Marjorie tells us about a child who wandered into a world of polar bears. Clouds, mice, nuts, berries, everything was designed to serve polar bears. "The child's life was in vain, because the polar bears had been made holy by their succulence."

The child had been a test, a message from god for polar bears—"the voracity of [Marjorie's] amnesia would disclaim and disclaim—and she would go on telling me about the polar bears until our plates were full of emptiness and I became large in the space that described her emptiness and I gave in to the emptiness of the polar bear universe... the primary object of creation was polar bears."

While Sorkow supposes in his opinion the law's power to decide who will raise a child is a contract law, Williams concludes that Whitehead's powerlessness in relation to the contract and Williams' own great-grandmother's powerlessness under the slaveholder's contract are analogous and that she, Williams, and Sara Presser's children are denied power over the children of their flesh, as Williams, the white lawyer, and their descendants are also denied the denial of flesh and blood, a locking away of words, values, as Williams puts it (226). Not only are brown children denied power over the children of their flesh, but they are also denied the denial of flesh and blood.

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Spanish alcoholic father and a black welfare mother, and the polar bears at the Brooklyn Zoo. Having broken into the zoo after hours with some friends, the boy entered the cage to swim in the moat. The bears mauled the boy to death. After the boy was dead, the police arrived, and the boy's body was discovered in the moat by some friends who had entered the zoo to look for him. The boy's death was a tragedy that had a profound impact on Williams, who had a much different experience with the zoo than the boy did. Williams visited the zoo as a child and was inspired by the polar bears, but the boy's death made her realize the dangers of such places.

In her stories, Williams explores the themes of identity, community, and the human experience. In one story, she describes a group of prepubescent white boys enrolled at Dartmouth in a summer basketball camp, traveling in "polar-bear" imagery—big-footed, hungry, weapons-eyed, bristled with rage and wilderness. The boys' behavior becomes increasingly forbidding, and the hunters' members report that the bears are no longer merely images but real and dangerous creatures. In another story, Williams describes her own experience with the bears, which had a profound impact on her identity and sense of self.

Williams' stories are complex and layered, and they often contain elements of paradox and contradiction. Despite their simplicity, her stories have a profound impact on her readers, and they continue to be an important part of her legacy. In her stories, Williams has created a world that is both familiar and strange, one that challenges our assumptions about the nature of identity and community. Her stories are a testament to the power of literature to inspire and challenge, and they continue to influence readers and writers alike.
and ends the chapter.

conspiracy and active amnesia may find ourselves at a similar end. These big white creatures are not holy or unholy. They are caged and an uncertain future. This second passage follows the story of Dartmouth and the Brooklyn boy’s death did result in the photograph of a bear pi...
and white skin as a particular badge others read, if the white IIi is fractured, then the burden of racial visibility carried by people designated as red or yellow or brown or black might be shared. I can imagine whites participating in a community of interracial exchange only if we come into this community with an acknowledged racial identity that sees how it is seen—just like everyone else. The knowledge that race is very much the result of history and linguistic formation and very little the result of biology has done little to diminish the significance of race as a marker of identity. White citizens and readers have to join that community of races before they can hope to look others in the face and see not black masks or white, brown, red, or yellow, the badges of insult, but the colors of cinnamon, chickory, almonds, and the tea rose.

Notes

1 Other peoples have also assumed for themselves superiority and entitlement because of caste or color. This is worth noting not as an argument for diminishing and dismissing the particular vanities and villainies of whites in history, but for contextualizing that history. I am chary of the assumption which claims superior evil for satanic white vanity. This assumption retains white people as the principle players. One must, finally, argue particulars: e.g., the European trade in West African slaves, driven by the plantation economy, was different in kind and degree from an earlier Indian trade in East African slaves. And one must, sometimes, concede the uselessness in prioritizing atrocities. To see a single evil, a greatest evil, is to turn one’s eyes from another.

2 In her paper, “Psychoanalysis and Normative Whiteness,” delivered at the 1989 MLA convention, Barbara Johnson explored, in a different theoretical frame, the construction of the white norm.

3 Michael Ondaatje’s novel, In the Skin of a Lion, provides a vivid image of invisibility. The prisoner Caravaggio escapes undetected by having his friends paint him blue when they are all painting a ceiling blue. “Buck and Patrick painted him, covering his hands and boots and hair with blue. They daubed his clothes and then, laying a strip of handkerchief over his eyes, painted his face blue, so he was gone—to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there” (180). While Caravaggio’s taking on the color of the background allows him specifically to escape jail, an analogous white disappearance into the white background permits an escape from any self-consciousness about one’s racial identity and how it circumscribes one’s own life as well as others’.

4 Reginald Horsman develops this thesis in his history of the myth of Anglo-Saxonism, Race and Manifest Destiny.

5 Trinh Minh-ha’s IIi is, of course, the model here.

6 I agree with Walter Benn Michaels’ conclusion to “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity”: “Our sense of culture is characteristically meant to displace race, but part of the argument of this essay has been that culture has turned out to be a way of continuing rather than repudiating racial thought.” I am much less persuaded by some earlier turns in Michaels’ argument which elide the role of physical force and law in the processes of assimilation and cultural reformation. But his insistence that race is salient in current debates about multiculturalism which intend most to get beyond it is a useful corrective to the course of that discussion out of which this essay arises.

Works Cited