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Strategy for Seeing White: Patricia Williams's Polar Bears

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A Strategy for Seeing White:

Reading Patricia Williams' Polar Bears

BARBARA ECKSTEIN

I used to believe that one could and should read books written by people from a variety of cultures and ethnic groups but that one could not presume to write about such texts since white intellectuals, however constructively and theoretically inclined, have turned reading into voyeurism. Although I do not have the Laguna reader's competence, I know the surface of my skin, that racial sign that those not white have learned to distrust. Although I want to use my words to shed that skin, those other words cannot. I wear them everywhere I go. They are the badge of whiteness others see.

Definitions of whiteness need to expose the prototrope of the white norm. Just as the Sioux must continue to resist the stereotype of the doomed primitive which circumscribes their future, so must whites resist the stereotype of the white norm which suggests that whiteness is a norm but that assertion is a product of ideological constructs. This maneuver has certainly turned reading into voyeurism. Although I do not have the Laguna reader's competence, I know the surface of my skin, that racial sign that those not white have learned to distrust. Although I want to use my words to shed that skin, those other words cannot. I wear them everywhere I go. They are the badge of whiteness others see.

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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 Black Image in the White Mind or Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks. Although historian George Fredrickson writes of The Black Image in the White 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 disinherted 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) antipath” (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 antipath.

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
Williams, such looking "rewounds, relives the early childhood anguish of uncensored seeing" (223). This statement leads logically to the discussion of how the "white" mother suckling a child who wandered into a world of polar bears provokes a rumination on commercial transactions and their transformation into exchange with other storytellers and other seers.

Williams concludes that Whitehead's powerlessness in relation to the contract and Williams' own great-grandfather's powerlessness under the slaveholder's contract are analogous and that she, Williams, and Sara Messer Whitehead (Baby M.) share a similar fortune of social position and dignity. She notes that contract law places a generous and public history in the flesh. That is to say, that the brown child does live in many white worlds; the white child, in many brown bodies (because one, after all, must look), images gleaned from experience lived and stories told, reside at the center, beginning, and end of Williams' rhetoric about rights. She argues, "Rights contain images of power, and manipulating those images, either visually or linguistically, is central in the making and maintenance of rights. In principle, therefore, the more dazzlingly diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society." (234)

In Williams' work details of particular stories and images are material to exchange with other storytellers and other seers. So Williams returns to stories about Marjorie, a storyteller herself. Pressed by Williams to tell stories about marjorie, a storyteller herself, Marjorie tells only about a child who wandered into the world of polar bears. . . . In the polar-bear universe, the primary object of creation was polar bears. Clouds, trees, and human beings were designed to serve polar bears. The child's laughter, a call for truth, and acquiescence to the ambiguous allegory is life in vain because the polar bears had been made holy by their looking away from the whites' gaze. On the one hand, whites' seeing Williams' reticent gaze into the eyes of whites devolves from an "uncensored seeing," (223) and her insight intact, she looks into the face of whiteness. On the other hand, her seeing that which people see all the worlds beyond me but not me (223), her seeing through the white people's eyes, their sight. As they have been taught to see it would logically result in her blinders. Rather than her seeing the faces of whiteness, she neutralizes the one hand, her seeing that the child was holy by its looking, and her seeing that she was holy by its seeing.

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juxtaposing to it words that construct more paradox. After describing her features we had found familiar on our own faces.

Williams complicates any truth value inherent in Marjorie's story by an anecdote: "a piece of torture,"(224) This event, resulting at the time in a song and the police shooting through three levels of bars at what Williams calls "proof of torture,"(224) It is a piece of torture that the story of polar bears devolves on her. But Marjorie, now a parr of polar bears, is dying. The only self is her own; the method of her assembly is the mirroring of the godmother.

As the caretaker, Williams finds that the responsibility of self-assembly, feeding, story-telling, filling emptiness-devolves on her. But Marjorie, devoid of words, is dying. The only self-assembled by Williams' stories is her own; the method of her assembly is the mirroring of the godmother.

Marjorie has bequeathed the polar-bear allegory to Williams, who, in turn, tells her readers (of whatever color) By relating the story to us, she...
After a long day of filming, the crew decides to take a break and enjoy the beauty of the snowy landscape.

## Scene 1

**Location:** Arctic tundra

**Characters:**
- Director
- cinematographer
- actors

**Synopsis:**
- The crew spends the evening around a campfire, sharing stories and laughing.
- Director gives final instructions before the next day's filming.

## Scene 2

**Location:** Inside the igloo

**Characters:**
- Inuit community
- film crew

**Synopsis:**
- The film crew sets up cameras inside the igloo, capturing everyday life.
- Inuit elders contribute their stories and perspectives.

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*Note: This is a creative narrative inspired by a hypothetical film production in the Arctic.*
and white skin as a particular badge others read, if the white I/i 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 I/i 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