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 how blackness has been defined and degraded lives on the surface of the skin. Whites, too, wear a badge of insult, a history fraught with the degrading treatment of other peoples. Whites, can, of course, use the badge as a shield fortified by the trope of the white norm. That shield of majority status and normative knowing can protect whites from seeing how they are seen. Whites who choose this shield may defend the kind of racial attitudes I am calling racisms, but the white badge of insult on their skin is nonetheless visible to others. I am not suggesting that the badge of insult has been or is experienced by all those who wear the white badge included—which is why I want to use my words to shed light on those other worlds. I cannot. I wear them everywhere I go. They are the badge of whiteness others see.

But saying this does not elicit a full and paradoxical enough definition of whiteness to produce useful dialogue in an interracial world. Definitions of whiteness need to expose the prototrope of the white norm, the racial difference: all others appear in relief against a blank, white, unyielding wall. People of a variety of racial identities, including some white who promote white supremacy and others who oppose it, depend for their arguments on this static construction of whiteness. An emphasis on the history of racism and oppression is newly excavated. On the contrary, buy the stereotype of the doomed primitive which circumscribes their future, whites must resist the stereotype of the white norm which seeks to perpetuate their complicity in a future of racial dominance and conflict. And like all implicit assumptions successfully disseminated, it has accrued considerable power to the white reader, thus adding, I hope, another layer to the complexity of their own racial group.3 Some whites, I believe, experience the pain of the white badge of insult, but saying this does not elicit a full and paradoxical enough definition of whiteness to produce useful dialogue in an interracial world. Definitions of whiteness need to expose the prototrope of the white norm, the racial difference: all others appear in relief against a blank, white, unyielding wall. People of a variety of racial identities, including some white who promote white supremacy and others who oppose it, depend for their arguments on this static construction of whiteness. An emphasis on the history of racism and oppression is newly excavated. On the contrary, buy the stereotype of the doomed primitive which circumscribes their future, whites must resist the stereotype of the white norm which seeks to perpetuate their complicity in a future of racial dominance and conflict. And like all implicit assumptions successfully disseminated, it has accrued considerable power to the white reader, thus adding, I hope, another layer to the complexity of their own racial group.3 Some whites, I believe, experience the pain of the white badge of insult.
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 disinherit 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) antiwill (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 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 antiwill.

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 suggests that the image of a white mother suckling a black child is uncensored, yet the white child is not seen as capable of action. This unresolved tension between the white child's passivity and the black child's potential for action is a recurring theme in Williams' work. She notes that contract law, which gives power to those who sign contracts, renders the signatories passive, granting only the contract the power to act. The signatories, it would seem, are in the state of antewill, waiting for the contract to act on their behalf.

Williams' reticent gaze into the eyes of whites devolves from an antewill to the emptiness of the white self. On the other hand, her seeing that which is white, her looking with the force and speed, her seeing unhindered, is called "pure will." Her turn to stories and to Marjorie, a storyteller herself, provokes a rumination on commercial transactions and the possibility of "pass." She uses the image of a white child and a black child to explore the power dynamics in contracts and how they affect the parties involved.

These stories, according to Williams, provide a window into the ways in which power is exchanged and manipulated. In her work, details of particular stories and images are material to the exchange, with other storytellers and other seers. 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 dizzying and diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society.
veracity if one knew how to see, listen, read? In fact, are the polar bears of Marjorie’s story even analogous to white people or white power? Are the humans of her story the People, that is, specifically her ethnic people, or are they a universal humankind?

Williams complicates any truth value inherent in Marjorie’s story by juxtaposing to it words that construct more paradox. After describing her features we had found familiar on our own faces.

Empower society in all its nonnormative parts, and this means looking for exchange, finally, cannot be among diverse races. But she does clearly state that the images shared must be “dizzingly diverse” in order to empower society in all its nonnormative parts, and this means looking into faces whose hostility or indifference or difference disassembles the features we had found familiar on our own faces.

Williams returns, then, to an image of polar bears and a brown child, race and rights. She recalls a story and a photograph from the New York newspapers about an eleven-year-old boy, child of a recently dead Hispanic 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 polar bears’ cage to swim in the moat. The bears mauled the boy to death. After the boy was dead, the police arrived; they shot and killed the bears. A photographer was there to capture the scene of the police shooting through three levels of bars at what Williams calls “a pieta of bears” (234). This event, resulting at the time in a cacophony of protest, advice, and arguments about rights, is further complicated by its placement in a chapter with Marjorie’s story. What is the white image in the black mind that these stories convey?

Although these whirling images do not stop for a fixed meaning, Williams offers two kinds of commentary on the polar-bear stories. One is an anecdote; the others are paradoxical lyricisms. The anecdote is about a group of prepubescent white boys enrolled at Dartmouth in a summer basketball camp, traveling in “platoons” of 25 or so and headed toward Williams on a sidewalk. Her good-humored description of them conjures up bear imagery—“big-footed, with fuzzy yellow crewcuts, loping” (235); nevertheless, indifferent to her, they jostle her “into the gutter” (235). Her yelling at them only solidifies their group in polite distance.

The two ambiguous lyrical passages I should quote in full so as not unduly to blunt their nuance. The first precedes the story of the Brooklyn Zoo.

In reality, it was a lovely polar-bear afternoon. The gentle force of the earth. A wide wilderness of islands. A conspiracy of polar bears lost in timeless forgetting. A gentleness of polar bears, a fruitfulness of polar bears, a silent black-eyed interest of polar bears, a bristled expectancy of polar bears. With the wisdom of innocence, a child threw stones at the polar bears. Hungry in nests, they rose, inquisitive, dark-souled, patient with foreboding, fearful in tremendous awakening. The instinctual ferocity of the hunter reflected upon the hunted. Then, proud teeth and warrior claws took innocence for wilderness and raging insubstantiality for tender rabbit breath. (234)

Most salient in this first passage are the contradictory words used to describe the bears: “gentleness” yet “conspiracy.” But then one notices that it is more the place and the times that are “lovely,” “wide,” and “gentle” than the bears themselves. The bears conspire together in timeless forgetting so that the afternoon seems only lovely and they, only a “gentle force of the earth.” But even before the child throws the stone, they are “silent,” staring, “bristled” with expectancy. After the child throws the stone, they rise and their behavior becomes increasingly forbidding. They are “fearful in tremendous awakening.” The child’s stone has exposed the conspiracy of gentleness and awakened fear which manifests itself as the hunter seeing his own ferocity in the hunted. This is how Williams imag-
ines the confrontation between bears and boy before the police and reporters arrived.

When the police, "helpless" and "desperate," shoot the bears and the photographers capture the image of pathos for newspaper readers, these guardians of law and a free press truncate the "tremendous awakening" of the bears. The image given to the public to read in the photograph of the bear piëta perpetuates the conspiracy of gentleness. The polar bear (white) world is insulated, pretty, and predicated on a hunter's violence made to look like the pathos of the prey.

That the bears were, in fact, bears and incapable of conspiracy and that they were caged only heightens the force of the metaphor. In Brooklyn polar bears have power only within their cage and only if men with guns are not outside their cage. Since they are fed in the zoo, their hunting "instinct" can only be some faint echo of its former call. Their zookeepers have also imposed on the bears "timeless forgetting" in order that they not remember freedom. The purpose of these bears with the beautiful white skins is to be on display representing some lovely, gentle, wide world which they never actually had and cannot remember. The boy’s presence in their cage, inside the bars, is as close an approximation of the wide world as they have had since they were bred or captured. And so they respond "fearful in tremendous awakening."

The boy apparently believed in the pastoral world represented by the bears in their cage. He must have. He must have believed the bears would share their moat, incredible as that seems. In her story Marjorie imagines that the eaten child is a sacrifice that made the polar bears holy, and the Brooklyn boy’s death did result in the photograph of a bear pieta. It seems Marjorie may have been right, but only if one thinks of holiness as an appearance of gentle innocence created by a good press agent. These big white creatures are not holy or unholy. They are caged and befuddled. They die not innocent but ignorant. Believing our cage is a world and our whiteness the norm, those of us white creatures capable of conspiracy and active amnesia may find ourselves at a similar end.

In the final passage, freed from the crew-cut boys, Williams muses on an uncertain future. This second passage follows the story of Dartmouth and ends the chapter.

I put distance between them and me, gave myself over to polar-bear musing. I allowed myself to be watched over by bear spirits. Clean white wind and strong bear smells. The shadowed amnesia; the absence of being; the presence of polar bears. White wilderness of icy meateaters heavy with remembrance; leaden with undoing; shaggy with the effort of hunting for silence; frozen in a web of intention and intuition. A lunacy of polar bears. A history of polar bears. A pride of polar bears. A consistency of polar bears. In those mean-

The search for nonnormative white consciousness runs a risk of seeming to ignore oppression while ruminating on a more comfortable self. In this regard I am reminded of the elderly white woman in John Coetzee’s Age of Iron. This aged protagonist can find no right consciousness or good behavior for herself in apartheid South African society. In one scene she drives her maid Florence into the township to find Florence’s teenaged son and immerses herself in a world of relentless violence and confusion, a world which she can later leave while its residents cannot. A man, a teacher, goads her into describing her responses to what she is seeing. A crowd forms demanding her response.

"These are terrible sights," I reeled, faltering. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now."

"This woman talks shit," said a man in the crowd. He looked around. "Shit," he said. No one contradicted him. (98-99)

I, who am of course not white but the color of unroasted almonds, risk the emptiness of words, "talking shit," in order to find images, stories, and ideas that construct a complex white racial self responsible for its history and resistant to entitlement. This resistance cannot occur within a construction of whiteness as the invisible normative non-race or the race of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. If whiteness is self-consciously seen as a race
and white skin as a particular badge others read, if the white II/i is frac­
tured, 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 biolo­
gy has done little to diminish the significance of race as a marker of iden­
tity. 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 cinna­
mon, 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 princi­
ple 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 paint­
ed 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 cir­
cumscribes 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 II/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 cul­
ture 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.

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