



Voices from the Gaps

Patricia Williams

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I am trying to create a genre of legal writing to fill the gaps of traditional legal scholarship. I would like to write in a way that reveals the intersubjectivity of legal constructions, that forces the reader both to participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that process.

— The Alchemy of Race and Rights

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Biography

Patricia Joyce Williams was born in racially segregated Boston in 1951. The daughter of Isaiah and Ruth Williams, Williams entered elementary school in the immediate wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Williams remembers being the only black family in her neighborhood when she was very little. The addition of only a few new families to the neighborhood changed its dynamic immediately. Williams remembers, “Whites who had seen me born and baked me cookies at Halloween and grown up with my mother now fled for their lives” (Rooster’s Egg 34-35). The civil rights movement that had worked to solve race problems in the country also created a backlash Williams had to confront in her everyday life.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1951
- * African-American legal scholar and academic
- * Author of *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

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Patricia Williams

Biography continued

Racial conflict and identity questions were nothing new to Williams's family. She now owns what she believes to be the contract for sale of her great-great-grandmother, an adolescent slave. Sophie Miller (taking the last name of her slave-holder) was purchased at the age of eleven. Her owner, Austin Miller, "one of Tennessee's finest lawyers," went on to become a judge (*Alchemy* 17-19). Austin Miller impregnated Sophie when she was eleven, with Patricia's great-grandmother Mary, making him Williams's great-great-grandfather. His two sons by his wife both also became lawyers like their father. When Williams was deciding what to do after graduating from college, her mother pointed out that law school would be a good option because "the Millers were lawyers so you have it in your blood." (155)

In 1992, Williams adopted her son, Peter. As a single black mother, she experienced systemic racism, classism, and sexism both during the adoption process and in society's reaction to families like hers. Williams had adopted her son the very week that Vice President Dan Quayle had lambasted the television program "Murphy Brown" for portraying its main character having a child out of wedlock, an enormous violation of 'family values' in the eyes of the 1992 Republican National Convention. Williams writes, "I remember it particularly because family values was the buzzword of the day, and amid all the excitement and joy of the baby's arrival I remained vaguely aware that in some sectors of this nation my use of the word 'family' might be seen as purloined. I am so many of the things that many people seemed to think were antifamily -- 'unwed,' 'black,' 'single,' everything but 'teenage.' Add 'mother' and it began to sound like a curse" (*Rooster's Egg* 171). Thus, Williams's own family -- she and her son Peter -- is enmeshed in socially constructed identities and expectations regarding who they're supposed to be, and where they are supposed to fit in our society. However, Patricia Williams hardly lives inside the mold society has tried to set for her.

Williams was one of the first black women to graduate from Wellesley College in 1972. Upon graduation, and following her mother's advice that the law was "in her blood," she entered Harvard Law School. Her matriculation in the fall of 1972 came around the time that the Supreme Court decided the Bakke case on affirmative action in higher education. These coinciding events were not lost on Williams, as she had to grapple with her role at Harvard Law School as a black woman in the early days of affirmative action. Williams was first hired to teach at the City University of New York - Queens, then went on to teach at the University of Wisconsin Law School, before finally moving on to Columbia University Law School where she is currently a professor. In her Contracts and Property classes, Professor Williams introduces real-life examples and sociological data with the intention of spurring class discussions on the topics of how the law is used to maintain social hierarchies, and how it can be used to create political change.



Patricia Williams

Biography continued

It is through her exploration of the status quo -- the system that maintains repressive hierarchies -- that Williams's scholarship has made its mark as original and important. Williams uses stories -- from her own life, those she hears from friends and relatives, and those she reads in the news -- to personalize and contextualize the social, political and legal structures that we encounter in our lives. Williams says, "I will try to write in a way that bridges the traditional gap between theory and praxis. It is not my goal merely to simplify; I hope that the result will be a text that is multilayered; that encompasses the straightforwardness of real life and reveals complexity of meaning" (Alchemy 6). This "multilayered" approach spans her academic writing, her slightly-more-general-audience books, and her regular column in *The Nation*. Williams writing works by using stories to draw out a larger point, much the way a children's bedtime story works, and in the same way, she calls her tales "parables." Her parables are about the homeless, the poor, people of color, exploited women, political prisoners, and victims of police brutality.

By telling these stories, Williams shows the people who are affected by government policies, she gives names and faces to the homeless who many walk past each day, and she does this with the purpose that in the future these people might be the ones who are thought of when important decisions are made.

Patricia J. Williams has been a pioneering black woman academic. Through her many writings she has created a form of legal scholarship that humanizes those people who other commentators often either vilify or simply leave behind. Through this work, Williams has impacted many students and young lawyers, and forced many of the staid traditionalists to face the injustices which they were perpetuating. And lest anyone think her contributions go unnoticed in the mainstream, in 2000, Professor Williams was one of 25 people awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. This award, often known as a "genius grant," gives \$500,000 with no strings attached. Williams received her award as "one of the most provocative intellectuals in American law," whose "voice has created a new form of legal writing and scholarship that integrates personal narrative, critical and literary theory, traditional legal doctrine, and empirical and sociological research" (MacArthur Fellow). As the creator of an important form of legal scholarship, Professor Williams has shown her ability to give voice to those traditionally left out of the legal structure, and as such, is giving them a place to start to dismantle the old hierarchical system of oppression.



Patricia Williams

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

The Alchemy of Race and Rights (1991).

The Rooster's Egg: On the Persistence of Prejudice (1995).

Seeing a Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race (1998).