The Alchemy of Race and Rights

Diary of a Law Professor

Patricia J. Williams
The Alchemy of Race and Rights, Patricia J. Williams, Harvard University Press, 1991, 0674014715, 9780674014718, 263 pages. Patricia Williams is a lawyer and a professor of commercial law, the great-great-granddaughter of a slave and a white southern lawyer. The Alchemy of Race and Rights is an eloquent autobiographical essay in which the author reflects on the intersection of race, gender, and class. Using the tools of critical literary and legal theory, she sets out her views of contemporary popular culture and current events, from Howard Beach to homelessness, from Tawana Brawley to the law-school classroom, from civil rights to Oprah Winfrey, from Bernhard Goetz to Marth Beth Whitehead. She also traces the workings of "ordinary racism"—everyday occurrences, casual, unintended, banal perhaps, but mortifying. Taking up the metaphor of alchemy, Williams casts the law as a mythological text in which the powers of commerce and the Constitution, wealth and poverty, sanity and insanity, wage war across complex and overlapping boundaries of discourse. In deliberately transgressing such boundaries, she pursues a path toward racial justice that is, ultimately, transformative. Williams gets to the roots of racism not by fingerpointing but by much gentler methods. Her book is full of anecdote and witness, vivid characters known and observed, trenchant analysis of the law's shortcomings. Only by such an inquiry and such patient phenomenology can we understand racism. The book is deeply moving and not so, finally, just because racism is wrong—we all know that. What we don't know is how to unthink the process that allows racism to persist. THis Williams enables us to see. The result is a testament of considerable beauty, a triumph of moral tactfullness, The result, as the title suggests, is magic..

Critical race theory cases, materials, and problems, Dorothy A. Brown, May 4, 2007, Political Science, 343 pages. This law school casebook examines cases through the analytical framework of critical race theory. There is a separate chapter on torts, contracts, criminal procedure, criminal ....

Confronting authority reflections of an ardent protester, Derrick A. Bell, 1994, Political Science, 195 pages. Recounting a protest at Harvard that cost him his tenured position, the author tells moving stories of others who have challenged authority, questions the system, and examines ....

Feminism, Volume 1, Susan Moller Okin, Jane J. Mansbridge, 1994, Feminism, 376 pages. .

Constitution With Amendments and the Constitution of the State of California, United States, 1893, , 58 pages. .


The Black Laws in the Old Northwest A Documentary History, Stephen Middleton, Jan 1, 1993, History, 427 pages. This book brings together the Black Laws of the Old Northwest (now the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin) for the first time, thereby providing a documentary ....

Was Blind, But Now I See White Race Consciousness & the Law, Barbara J. Flagg, 1998, Law, 189 pages. "Race" does not speak to most white people. Rather, whites tend to associate race with people of color and to equate whiteness with racelessness. As Barbara J. Flagg ....

Civil Rights and the Reagan Administration, Norman C. Amaker, Jan 1, 1988, Law, 224 pages. Very Good,No Highlights or Markup,all pages are intact..

Desegregation from Brown to Alexander an exploration of Supreme Court strategies, Stephen L. Wasby, Anthony A. D'Amato, Rosemary Metrailer, Jun 1, 1977,, 489 pages. Positing the hypothesis that the United States Supreme Court makes rather than finds the law, this analysis of race reDÂ­Â­lations cases provides a model by which to examine Court ....

Critical Race Theory An Introduction, Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, 2001, Law, 167 pages. For well over a decade, critical race theory?the school of thought that holds that race lies at the very nexus of American life?has roiled the legal academy. In recent years ....

Toward freedom and civil rights for the freedmen military policy origins of the thirteenth amendment and the Civil rights act of 1866, Mary Frances Berry, Howard University. Dept. of History, 1975, Law,
A burst of light essays, Audre Lorde, 1988, 134 pages. The author discusses her life as a Black lesbian, her struggle against cancer, sadomasochism within the gay community, and apartheid and its relationship to racism in American....

Justice in the American South, Anthony Lester, Amnesty International, Political Science, 30 pages.

Patricia Williams is a lawyer and a professor of commercial law, the great-great-granddaughter of a slave and a white southern lawyer. The Alchemy of Race and Rights is an eloquent autobiographical essay in which the author reflects on the intersection of race, gender, and class. Using the tools of critical literary and legal theory, she sets out her views of contemporary popular culture and current events, from Howard Beach to homelessness, from Tawana Brawley to the law-school classroom, from civil rights to Oprah Winfrey, from Bernhard Goetz to Marth Beth Whitehead. She also traces the workings of ordinary racism; everyday occurrences, casual, unintended, banal perhaps, but mortifying. Taking up the metaphor of alchemy, Williams casts the law as a mythological text in which the powers of commerce and the Constitution, wealth and poverty, sanity and insanity, wage war across complex and overlapping boundaries of discourse. In deliberately transgressing such boundaries, she pursues a path toward racial justice that is, ultimately, transformative.

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University and academic presses have long been essential to the sharing of new ideas and challenging of old assumptions, a tradition we're celebrating during this second annual University Press Week. This year's focus is on the ways in which AAUP member presses are helping to drive innovation in both format and subject matter, and so today we're pleased to offer a UP Week Blog Tour post from Harvard professor Jeffrey Schnapp on the future of scholarly communication. Schnapp is Professor of Romance Languages & Literatures, faculty director of metaLAB (at) Harvard, faculty co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, and general editor of the metaLABprojects series...

In a personal and profound examination of the United States legal system and its effect on African Americans, Patricia J. Williams uses the term alchemy--the medieval, mysterious practice of turning base metal into gold--as a haunting metaphor for the nearly mystical process by which United States law emboldens and endangers blacks through arcane interpretation, as well as the heroic will of a people to make those laws manifest. "I'm interested in the way in which the legal language flattens and confines in absolutes the complexity of meaning inherent in any given problem," she writes. "I am trying to challenge the usual limits of commercial discourse by using an intentionally double-voiced and relational, rather than a traditionally legal black letter, vocabulary."

With an authorial voice that draws upon Williams's perspective as teacher, lawyer, black American, and woman, The Alchemy of Race and Rights uses a palette of court cases, educational encounters, and personal experiences--including her discovery of her slave ancestor and her interactions with school deans over how to teach law--to create a literary cubist portrait detailing the rhetoric and reality that color the complexion of American justice. --Eugene Holley Jr. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One of the most invitingly personal, even vulnerable, books I've read...Williams has a knack for
keeping you just a bit off balance...Her readings invigorate familiar controversies: If you thought there was nothing new to be said about Howard Beach or Eleanor Bumpurs, Tawana Brawley or Baby M., read Williams on them. But some of the most magical turns of argument flow from far less public events...The law needs a brain...and, even more, a heart and some courage. Certificates won't help. This book just might.

Williams melds sophisticated legal scholarship, memoir and allegory into a rich melange that will change perceptions about the substance and spirit of black women...At a time when the nation is wrestling with political correctness or wrongness...Williams' candor about the law and her life is refreshing...The Alchemy of Race and Rights brings jurisprudence to the people while leaving no doubt that the author is among the finest legal talents among us.

Williams is an original and imaginative mind, an unstultified, insubordinate thinker who jumps off cliffs and lands on her feet, who flies close to the sun and never melts her wings. She accomplishes the near impossible: simultaneous depth of engagement in law and world. The alchemical forge she theorizes between race and rights parallels her own method: 'the making of something out of nothing.' See what she makes out of sausage, polar bears, Beethoven. See if you can ever shop at Benetton's again.

Finally, after a year and a half in law school I have found something that feels real. Professor Williams' book addresses all the unspoken assumptions and rules that frame and define the study of law. Her voice is the first that I have heard or read which captures the frustration of existing in a world of law that is so unapologetically deficient of humanity. The book reveals the rich and thick veneer of denial that surrounds and protects those privileged by the law. She dissects the silent and invisible plague of racism that infiltrates every aspect of the law. She forces discomfort on herself and the reader in order to reach some greater knowledge or understanding.

It is the book's refusal to conform to traditional forms of legal discourse that helps to powerfully illuminate the inherent limitations, oppressions, and inadequacies of the law. The narrative form brings to life the messy complications and nuances that inhabit not just law, but our relationship as individuals, and as a nation, to race and gender.

I recently had the pleasure of re-reading this remarkable book. Over the past half-century, it is no doubt one of the most important books on race published in the United States. The author blends autobiography, keen visual observations, analysis, and heart into a powerful journey through the landscape of American race relations. The result is utterly convincing: the convergence of the "personal and the political" moves each reader to examine his or her own relationship to the subjects at hand. While most race books pontificate, this one eases the reader into examining some very difficult, indeed painful questions. Williams, a writer of great skill and elegance, has pulled off a miracle in the field of race writing, an enduring masterpiece that has changed the way we think and talk about race in America.

This is an extraordinary book. Through the use of a wide array of reasoning and writing methods, Williams makes it possible for us to get a glimpse of the dangerous and contradictory legal world that ethnic minorities must negotiate to survive. It may be a bit of a stretch for people unaccustomed to thinking outside the box as well as those unfamiliar with literature and literary theory. But the insight Williams offers is well worth the effort. It also provides members of the privileged class with the unusual & valuable experience of not being the central focus of the text. A fabulous experience for readers with an open mind!

The Alchemy of Race and Rights is a wonderful exploration of race and the law in modern society. In a whirlwind of impressionistic strokes, Williams beautifully illustrates the mutually constitutive nature of bodies and rules. Her elegant prose leads the reader to contemplate the law from a place where subject position is everything, and the false security of formal equivalence and abstract monetization are the very currency of oppression.

Though her writing style may be off-putting to those in search of a formal treatise on race and the
law, and her fragmented invocation of the personal as a starting point for inductive work is sometimes difficult to follow, the impressionistic quality of the text is also one of its great strengths. In the end, a deeper meaning is conveyed through this sometimes schizophrenic free association than could be done through any more formally-structured argument.

Now that that is out of the way, this book is amazing. If you want details, reference the comment. Otherwise, just trust when I say if you are a prelaw/law student who aims for an ethic approach to understanding the limitations of the law, then you must give this book a chance.. and even if you're not aiming for an ethical approach, just read this lest you become hollywood's (/traditional) caricature of a lawyer.

The part of this book that I enjoyed the most was the personal dimension that Williams allows. Reading her book is almost like reading her journal-- her innermost thoughts exposed and analyzed. I was definitely blown away by her ability to draw you in-- personally, I was quite emotionally invested as I neared the later chapters.

&ldquo;From time to time I try to imagine this world of which he spoke--a culture in whose mythology words might be that precious, in which words were conceived as vessels for communications from the heart; a society in which words are holy, and the challenge of life is based upon the quest for gentle words, holy words, gentle truths, holy truths.

I try to imagine for myself a world in which the words one gives one's children are the shell into which they shall grow, so one chooses one's words carefully, like precious gifts, like magnificent gifts, like magnificent inheritances, for they convey an excess of what we have imagined, they bear gifts beyond imagination, they reveal and revisit the wealth of history.

&ldquo;In the law, rights are islands of empowerment. . . . 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 dizzyingly diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society.&rdquo;

Williams received her bachelor's degree from Wellesley College in 1972, and her Juris Doctor from Harvard Law School in 1975. At Harvard, she was one of ten black women in her graduating class of 536.[2] She worked as a consumer advocate in the office of the City Attorney in Los Angeles, was a fellow in the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth College and served as associate professor at the University of Wisconsin Law School and its department of women's studies. She is currently the James L. Dohr Professor of Law at Columbia University where she has taught since 1991.[3]

Williams is a member of the State Bar of California and the Bar of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Williams has served on the advisory council for the Medgar Evers College for Law and Social Justice of the City University of New York, the board of trustees of Wellesley College, and on the board of governors for the Society of American Law Teachers, among others.[4]

The critical legal school tends to affirm several common thesis, such as that law is indeterminate and so judges end up making decisions based on their personal and social biases. If all law is politics and that every legal decision is a political decision, then there is no real distinction between the judicial and legislative. Both forms of activity construct a "social space," that the law more often than not serves the interests of those with power because it protects them from responding to the demands of the week. Finally, critical legal studies maintains that the legal order is based around a...

Both bell hooks's Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom and Patricia Williams's The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor inform the conversation on the intersection of community, diversity, and education. Drawing on their experiences as Black women scholars and teachers &mdash; an English professor and a law professor, respectively &mdash; hooks and Williams explore their personal and political experiences with teaching. Patricia Williams reflects on the relationship between race and the law. Through vignettes, she shares
experiences in teaching that cause her to question the legal community and often place her at odds with both the scholarly and student communities. Building upon Paulo Friere's conceptualization of education as the practice of freedom, hooks explores the theory and practice of teaching that enables students to transgress racial, gender, and class boundaries in order to achieve freedom. Both texts draw upon and inform many genres, and both are written from a feminist perspective. This review invites the reader to explore the intersection of the notions — community and diversity — and to consider the implications for educators committed to creating educational communities that are inclusive of the perspectives of faculty of color.

If educators believe in established conceptions of community, a group of people who share common interests, a similarity or an identity, or collective responsibility, then these two books are required reading for those in the education profession who are committed to creating viable teaching and learning communities that build on and foster diversity. The perspectives explored in these texts must be considered when scholars, particularly those in schools of education, move beyond the rhetoric of phrases such as "creating multicultural settings," "fostering diversity," and "inclusive communities," to soliciting, listening, thinking, and acting upon perspectives that are different. These books remind us that both the conceptualization of the word "community" in education contexts and the reality of community are not uniform, and in some cases not even comparable. Further, as hooks notes, "the possession of a term does not bring a process or a practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term" (p. 62).

Williams's and hooks's experiences are likely to offer a chance for some individuals to experience a sense of community. Others are likely to experience them as "dangerous," as did a recent reviewer of hooks's work (Sykes, 1995). My reading of these texts provided the rare experience of discovering work with perspectives that speak to the reality of my life as a Black woman and as a Black woman in academia, and created a community for me. Both texts offer a lens through which to see how Black female intellectuals develop their craft, and how their experiences and realities inform their thinking and identities. Both Williams and hooks discuss their desire that their writing be accessible to the communities in which they work, and acknowledge that this desire sometimes places them in opposition to the academy. hooks notes, for example, that her choice of writing style reflects "political decisions motivated by the desire to be inclusive, to reach as many readers as possible in as many different locations" (p. 71).

Most compelling in Williams's work is the sharing of her daily life experiences (current events, conversations with her family, the political realities of Black life in America) and how such experiences inform her work as a law professor. While her diary contains many legal references, it is replete with provocative anecdotes that nevertheless entice the non-specialist reader.

hooks's work complements Williams's by providing a more global discussion of issues in teaching, feminism, and race. hooks offers a series of essays that provide examples of her work with teachers and students. Her essay, "Embracing Change: Teaching in a Multicultural World," addresses how dimensions of multicultural education vary, depending on who you are teaching. hooks addresses the need for teachers to be aware of ensuing political manifestations of race, sex, and class. In her essay "Building a Teaching Community," she discusses the need for critical theorists to talk about and collaborate on their evolving teaching practice. She includes a dialogue between herself and a White male professor to provide a model for how to approach such a dialogue across racial boundaries.

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