



Alchemy of Race and Rights

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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 tactfulness. The result, as the title suggests, is magic.

Alchemy of Race and Rights Details

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From Reader Review Alchemy of Race and Rights for online ebook

Jennifer says

Personal and relevant, Williams offers a human viewpoint into critical race theory and law.

Linda says

in the midst of law school, some 18 years ago, i read this book. it made me feel less alone in that oft alienating environment. it reminded me why i was there and why i was doing what i was doing. patricia williams is brilliant!

Jessica Lu says

This belongs on all our bookshelves. I'll read this many times over.

Adrien says

Moving, expressive -- both emotionally and intellectually. The style meshes cohesively with the subtext, which probably makes it so effective. Does get a little one-note. Otherwise this would've been 5 stars.

Isa says

I learned that the deeply nuanced complexity of racial identity can drive an intelligent person mad, if she lets it. A worthwhile read.

Claudia says

Brilliantly written. I read a few times. Professor Patricia Williams is vibrant and through her personal experience and depth of her research I saw much of my own. One of the best in the intersectionality of law and race. Do read it. it takes 5 stars but I wish I had more to give!

Marjorie says

The most inspiring book for lawyers who went into the profession as idealists and now wonder what the hell they're doing. Law is a powerful field, but the sheer force of its conservatism (i.e. love of status quo) can make it a difficult career choice for activists and agents of social change. Patricia Williams, in her scholarly

but oh-so-approachable style, illuminates both the promise of law and its failures. She is not a cynic. She is not a "realist" (one who opts to "take life as it comes"). Patricia Williams is no less than a true visionary who has been tested in the crucible. Her work reminds me why I chose to become a lawyer--even in the moments when I too stand on the pile of rubble that were once my dreams for the profession and wonder "what now?"

Avatara Smith carrington says

I honestly love her manipulation of prose to convey legal jargon in a manner that is not off putting but instead very inviting for those who might not be familiar with heavy concepts related to this country's racial relationship to the formation of laws and how they are carried out in a modern context. It was breathtaking to see the personal interwoven with legal theory, I was honestly unsure of if I would like this book because I thought it would be weighted down by inaccessible language and concepts but the author really made this piece not only digestible but also a literary delight. In the end I have walked away from this book with a wealth of knowledge and more comfort in my plans to pursue law... it's definitely a must read for racially marginalized folks thinking about law school and academia.

Michael David Cobb says

At the age of 29 it was...

"Probably the most influential book I have read in my life. It linked me absolutely and affirmatively to the pursuit of the historical societal constructs and the force applied behind them to maintain the sense of the people's ability to draw hard and fast rules for themselves and others. "

Laura says

Wherein a law professor meditates on being the object of property. I read portions of this in law school. I'm glad I did. It is, to no small extent, a critical reflection on being The Other in the academy. The author was one of the first African American professors at Harvard and she was very much alone. Among the things that reinforced her aloneness were gratuitously racist factual scenarios on exams. E.g. 84 (what are "the tax implications for Kunta Kinte's master when the slavecatchers cut off his foot"?). She has quite a list. When she pushed back, the academy responded defensively and childishly. 91. My vague dislike of Harvard continues unabated.

She also recounts the story of one of her students who transitioned while in law school. 122. When the student started using the women's restroom, some members of the student body totally lost their tiny normative minds:

There was an enormous outcry from women students of all political persuasions, who 'felt raped' in addition to the more academic assertions of some who 'feared rape.' In a complicated storm of homophobia, the men of the student body let it be known that they too 'feared rape' and vowed to chase her out of any and all men's rooms. The oppositional forces of men and women reached a compromise: S. should use the dean's bathroom. Alas, in the dean's

bathroom no resolution was to be found, for the suggestion had not been an honest one but merely an integration of the fears of each side. Then, in his turn of the dean, circumspection having gotten him this far in life, expressed polite, well-modulated fears about the appearance of impropriety in having students visit his inner sanctum, and many other things most likely related to his fear of a real compromise of hierarchy.

122-23. I'm watching this same fight go on right now and I'm horrified that in 25 years, we couldn't see our way to just letting people pee in peace.

This book is agonizing in a lot of ways. Professor Williams is a real product of our country, our moral triumphs and our moral defeats. She is also the descendent of a lawyer. As she recounts, "My great-great-grandfather Austin Miller, a thirty-five-year-old lawyer, impregnated my eleven-year-old great-great-grandmother Sophie, making her the mother of Mary, my great-grandmother, by the time she was twelve." 155. Professor Williams' mother told her she "had nothing to fear in law school, that law was 'in my blood.'" 217.

As a book, it's a little disjointed; felt like a bunch of essays strung together rather than a long form piece. But as individual pieces, they are powerful. The last essay, "On Being the Object of Property" is both a gut punch and incredibly generous.

Well worth the time.

Crystal says

I've read and re-read this book a million times... just finished re-reading it... what can I say besides that Pat Williams is a genius? Her anecdotes connect legal theory with practice, and in a broader sense, she is able to concretely relay what it means to be a person-of-color navigating through a network of elite, WASP communities and institutions. Also, she's one of my professors at the moment, so I can say with complete confidence that she is brilliant and equally humble.

Lee B says

This book is a glimpse into what is missing from law. Ideas of justice are absent in most applications of the law, especially regarding women, children, people of color, queer folks and prisoners. Weaving personal narrative and story-telling into an examination in legal theory, Williams accurately captures a picture of what we need for a more restorative form of justice. What I find difficult, not only in reading this but other CLS/CRS works, is how do we move towards a better application of law when it is so mis-used. How can we remedy a system to which has caused this injustice? Is it even possible? I found this quote particularly moving, especially when looking at human rights as a tool for a more comprehensive form of justice: "In the law, rights are islands of empowerment. To be unrighted is to be dis-empowered, and the line between rights and no-rights is most often the line between dominators and oppressed. 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," (233-234)

Tracy says

Strong discussion against objectivity of race in legal arguments. Williams explores the power of language and context in law through personal experience and knowledge.

"What is "impersonal" writing but denial of self? If withholding is an ideology worth teaching, we should be clearer about that as the bottom line of the enterprise. We should also acknowledge the extent to which denial of one's authority in authorship is not the same as elimination of oneself; it is ruse, not reality. And the object of such ruse is to empower still further; to empower beyond the self, by appealing to neutral, shared, even universal understandings. In a vacuum, I suppose there's nothing wrong with that attempt to empower: it generates respect and distance and a certain obeisance to the sleekness of a product that has been skinned of its personalized complication. But in a world of real others, the cost of such exclusive forms of discourse is empowerment at the expense of one's relation to those others; empowerment without communion. And as the comfort of such false power becomes habitual, it is easy to forget that the source of one's power is quite limited, not the fiat of a heavenly mandate. It is easy to forget how much that grandiosity of power depends on the courtesy and restraint of a society of others no less equally endowed than you.

The other thing contained in assumption of neutral, impersonal writing styles is the lack of risk. It is not only a ruse, but a warm protective hole to crawl in, as if you were to throw your shoe out the front door while insisting that no one's home. I also believe that the personal is not the same as "private": the personal is merely highly particular. I think the personal has fallen into disrepute as sloppy because we have lost the courage and the vocabulary to describe it in the face of the enormous social pressure to "keep it to ourselves"—but this is where our most idealistic and our deadliest politics are lodged, and are revealed."

(92-93)

Flora says

I first read this book as an earnest, politically-correcting-myself undergrad, but took another look as a post-grad cynic and was blown away yet again. It's not so much her arguments, which are familiar, as her rhetorical style, which is, simply, mad. And brilliantly so. She is an utterly unique writer, and while her baroque language and often counter-intuitive argumentation tend to read in her later work as incoherence, here she pulls it off. Worth checking out especially for her chapter on the Tawana Brawley case.

Ali says

I can't speak about Williams' ideas because her overly-affected, would-be-poet style obscures any real thought. No wonder this book cost me only \$.50.

