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# Williams’s Polar Bears: The Intersection of Black and Female

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Course Design: Critical Analyses

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I grew up in Nebraska, an hour away from one of the best zoos in the country. When I was little, my sister and I would visit it at least once every summer, whether we went with our parents or grandparents, or even with a friend’s family who had season passes. I’d lean over the railings in front of the different exhibits, peering at the animals and their various living spaces. My favorite exhibit was the Desert Dome, because there were real, live bats—my favorite animal at the time—which would swoop over your head at any moment, but also partially because my sister was terrified of bats. To make things fair, I had to wait around forever while my little sister dawdled at every animal in the arctic exhibit, especially the polar bears. We would wait for what felt like hours for the bears to finally uncurl from their naps and swim in their little pool, which you could watch from underneath the water through the glass. I understood her obsession with the polar bears. They were quite beautiful, and the way their fur moved under the water was mesmerizing. But then, they would yawn, showing their huge teeth and black gums, or I would read the “Fun Facts!” panel next to their enclosure about how *Polar bears can weigh as much as a dozen men!* and *Polar bears can smell prey up to 20 miles away!* and I would immediately be reminded of why I hated the polar bears. The glass between them and me felt thin, and I would beg my parents to let me move on to the penguin exhibit next door. I never liked being close to something that scary, especially when the only things keeping me safe were a thick pane of glass and a safety railing.

My brain wandered to those memories of the zoo when I read Patricia Williams’s “On Being the Object of Property.” The story that her godmother Marjorie told her about the polar bear world

reminded me of those feelings I had as a kid—awe at the way Williams put the allegory to work and fear once I understood it. The way she intertwined it with her counterstory and made it a part of the story of her history helped me understand how the allegory connected to her Black womanhood, a reoccurring theme in “On Being the Object of Property.” Williams does not explicitly mention Critical Race Theory (CRT), because the movement was yet to be born, but her groundbreaking work helped set the stage for important discussions about intersectionality that can help us understand CRT now. CRT is a social movement and field of study consisting of “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado and Stefancic 3). Beginning in law studies with scholars like Alan Freeman, Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and others, it eventually expanded to include different areas of study and is now made up of eight tenets including intersectionality, which we will focus on here. Delgado and Stefancic define intersectionality as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings” (58). Intersectionality is a vital part of CRT because it assumes that everyone has many layers of identities that affect their oppression. As an original founder of CRT, Williams’s contributions to counterstory, interdisciplinarity, and the lived intersectional experience of Black women were invaluable. The essay focused on here, “On Being the Object of Property,” was first published in 1988 in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, a Women and Gender Studies Journal, but was later published as a part of her book *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* in 1991. Despite, and because of, her crafty writing that combined several types of texts and directly analyzed her position as a Black woman in the world, her book was not well received by all audiences, especially white male critics. It is upon this backdrop that we will explore Williams’s polar bear allegory in relation to CRT and intersectionality.

Williams first introduces the polar bear allegory on page thirteen, about halfway through her essay. It is a story that her godmother Marjorie told her when she asked for a story about her grandmother’s childhood. Instead of directly telling Williams about her girlhood, Marjorie would tell her a story about a child “who

wandered into a world of polar bears, who was prayed over by polar bears, and in the end eaten" (Williams 16). The polar bear world was made to serve polar bears, and the child also existed for them. The child's death made the polar bears "holy." (16).

This story can be viewed from different angles to better understand intersectionality and the unique experience of Black women. First, Black women are the child in the allegory, because they are often sacrificed for other groups' success, like how the polar bears sacrifice the child to become more holy. Social movements such as Civil Rights and Women's Rights have often discarded Black women to appeal to white men to acquire better legal rights. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefancic propose a hypothetical situation that shows how Black women, and especially Black mothers, have a certain intersection of identities that stops them from feeling completely accepted in Civil Rights and Feminist groups. Both groups wholeheartedly accept the Black mother's participation, but the groups are made to serve the most common or most easily accepted identity that represents them, like Black men or white women, not her (Delgado and Stefancic 59-61). Williams comments on this "anonymity" of being a Black single mother, where the intersection of identities renders a person almost invisible (6). Like the polar bear world, the Civil Rights and Feminist groups were created to serve a certain type of person. While the mother choosing to join these groups was not as accidental as the child "wandering" into the polar bear world, the intersection of her identities is not in her control, making the wandering in this case her joining the groups without knowing beforehand that the groups did not serve her collection of identities.

This analysis can be further extended with Williams's main argument about will. Throughout "On Being the Object of Property," Williams argues that laws oppress people of color, especially women of color, because those that write the laws assume that Black people have no will or self-determination. Using Williams's analysis, if a certain race removes a person's will, then layers of other identities like gender, sexuality, ability, and parental status further remove a person's will in the eyes of their oppressors. Thus, the wandering child in the polar bear allegory refers to not only people of color but women of color, because they have even less direction and determination than their male counterparts. Furthermore, Williams's analysis of market theory and race further extends this analysis. Williams's recount of Marjorie's story states that "The child's life was not in vain because the polar bears had been made holy by *its* suffering" (16, emphasis added). The "it" in this case is the child, stripped of their humanity. They are not offered a personal pronoun, just an "it" referring to their life. Just before the introduction of the polar bear story, Williams writes about the devaluation of Black people in the market, saying,

...When black people were bought and sold as slaves, they were placed beyond the bounds of humanity...in the twistedness of our brave new world, when blacks have been thrust out of the market and it is white children who are bought

and sold, black babies have become "worthless" currency to adoption agents... (16)

In this new world, Black people are no longer not humans, but also worthless in the market. They are an "it" that makes the polar bears holy. Black women, then, at the crossroads of Black worthlessness and female worthlessness, are much worse off.

We can then factor functionalism into this discussion, which Williams references in a footnote that links to a book, *The Dialectical Biologist* by Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin. According to Levins and Lewontin, functionalism is the view that "the entire universe, including living organisms and especially the human species and its social organization, was perfectly fitted to serve a higher purpose" (66). They explain that those with this view believe that man's higher purpose is God, and then everything else was created to serve man. This reflects the polar bear race in Williams's story, for whom "the rest of the living world was fashioned to serve," but who also serve a God, who sent them the "message" in the form of the child and made them holy (16). Functionalism helps explain the low value of Black female life; they exist below both white people and men in the functionalist hierarchy. Black mothers, then, have an even lower position, since they also serve their children. This triple-layer (or even quadruple- or more layered, depending on the number of intersections between other identity statuses) oppression places them in a unique position that the CRT tenet of intersectionality understands.

Intersectionality not only understands that a person's experience is unique, but also that it can be complex. Williams's metaphor of the polar bears understands this and complicates Black women's perspectives. Another fun animal fact that I read during my trips to the zoo was that polar bears have black skin and transparent fur; they appear white only because of the way the light hits their bodies. In this way, Black women can be both the polar bears and the wandering child. Williams sees herself as a polar bear because of her mixed ancestry. She writes early in the essay about how her mother brings up her white ancestor Austin Miller when she learns Williams will be going to law school. Miller was a lawyer and enslaver of her great-great-grandmother Sophie, and Williams writes that when her mother did this, she "hid the lonely, black, defiled-female part of herself and pushed me forward as the projection of a competent self, a cool rather than despairing self, a masculine rather than a feminine self" (6). Her mother was encouraging her to fit in with the polar bears, to put the white part of herself on display to survive and succeed in law school, a place dominated by white men. In this instance, she was one of the polar bears, pretending life was made for her, but Black women were still the child she sacrificed. To succeed, she had to forsake women like herself and allow their further oppression. Women's and Gender Studies calls this the *matrix of domination*, the idea that different forms, or axes, of domination pull from similar forms of oppression (Hamilton et al. 319). In the matrix of domination, some individuals can succeed by meeting societal standards for

their race, gender, sexuality, and other identities, but will always be supporting the oppression of others in their same identities (319). Hamilton et al. discuss that for women, some gain individual benefits by aligning their identities with societal requirements but will always lose as a collective because they will be oppressing other women by continuing harmful stereotypes (330). So, Black women are both the polar bear and the child; blending in with polar bears and joining the white people will always oppress the other Black women, making them also the child put up as a sacrifice. In neither position can Black women truly escape oppression.

This analysis by no means fully explores the complexity of Williams's polar bear allegory, because it plays into different conversations around CRT. Nevertheless, the evidence I examined here illustrates the CRT tenet of intersectionality, showing how removing racism from the equation would not end Black women's suffering, at least not until other oppressive systems like sexism remain. In the closing line of her essay, Williams refers to the "complexity of messages implied in our being," describing how all hold a complex, distinct perspective, which is why intersectionality is one of CRT's tenets. Williams does a fantastic job at showing this, composing a fascinating essay in her own style that reflects her experiences as a Black woman.

### Works Cited

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