
**Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991)**

My abiding recollection of being a student at Harvard Law School is the sense of being invisible. I spent three years wandering in a murk of unreality; I observed large, mostly male bodies assert themselves against one another like football players caught in the gauzy mist of intellectual slow motion. I stood my ground amid them, watching them deflect from me, unconsciously, politely, as if I were a pillar in a crowded corridor. Law school was for me like being on another planet, full of alienated creatures with whom I could make little connection. The school created a dense atmosphere that muted my voice to inaudibility. All I could do to communicate my existence was to posit carefully worded messages into hermetically sealed, vacuum-packed blue books, place them on the waves of that foreign sea, and pray that they would be plucked up by some curious seeker and understood.

Perhaps there were others who felt what I felt. Perhaps we were all aliens, all silenced by the dense atmosphere. Thinking that made me feel, ironically, less isolated. It was not merely that I was black and female, but a circumstance external to myself that I, and the collective, could not help internalizing.

When I became a law professor, I found myself on yet another planet: a planet with a sun as strong as a spotlight and an atmosphere so thin that my slightest murmur would travel for miles, skimming from car to car to ear, merrily distorting and refracting as it went. Again I comforted myself that my sense of alienation and now-heightened visibility were not inherent to my blackness and my femaleness, but an uncomfortable atmospheric condition afflicting everyone. But at the gyroscopic heart of me, there was and is a deep realization that I have never left the planet earth. I know that my feelings of exaggerated visibility and invisibility are the product of my not being part of the larger cultural picture. I know too that the larger cultural picture is an illusion, albeit a powerful one, concocted from a perceptual consensus to which I am not a party; and that while these perceptions operate as dictators of truth, they are after all merely perceptions.