

**QUEER BLACK MARXIST FEMINIST POLITICAL
ECONOMY IN A WHITE-SUPREMACIST
HETEROSEXIST-HOMOPHOBIC CAPITALIST
PATRIARCHY: RHONDA M. WILLIAMS ON METHOD,
HISTORY, THEORY, AND POLICY¹**

Mathew Forstater

INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY AND REFLEXIVITY

Rhonda M. Williams always courageously exhibited and warmly encouraged reflexivity, and paid careful attention to issues of identity—of both subject and object of social inquiry. She taught that neither subject nor object in social inquiry could be either anonymous or static; in fact, she also rejected the subject/object dichotomy. This calls for some reflexivity on my own part.

I have called the paper “Queer Black Marxist Feminist Political Economy in a White-Supremacist Heterosexist-Homophobic Capitalist Patriarchy,” but on paper, at least, the title hides the fact that I am a White Middle-Class Heterosexual European Male. But identity for Williams is complex, complicated, contingent, and contradictory. I am a White, Middle-Class Heterosexual European Male, but I am also severely physically disabled. I am also a Jew, but one opposed to political Zionism and supportive of Palestinian liberation and self-determination. Moreover, I am also a formal convert to Buddhism and have practiced Buddhism all of my adult life. I also consider myself a socialist. And I hold a B.A. in African American Studies from Temple University (one of the most Afrocentric Black Studies departments in the world).

So, am I a White Middle-Class Heterosexual European Male, or am I a severely disabled, ethnically-Jewish/religiously-Buddhist, anti-Zionist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-Eurocentric socialist? I am all of these things, and more. And (sometimes) less. Some aspects of my identity are rooted in intersubjective self-understandings. Others depend on transsubjective social structures that mediate one’s social inclusion in certain communities

(and social exclusion from others) regardless of self-identification. To paraphrase Marx, people do not make their own identity just as they please:

[T]hey do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Yet, individuals do have some agency with regard to their identity—the degree to which they do differs in differing social and historical circumstances. Identity is not static, but ever-shifting.

All this recalls Williams' warnings about the dangers of false universalizations and approaches that homogenize ways of being and knowing among members of a particular group: "no two persons belong to exactly the same set of socially defined groups."² One of the many challenges that Williams' work poses for scholars and activists primarily concerned with one form of inequality—be it race, class, gender, sexuality, or any other—is to acknowledge and consider the implications of intragroup differentiation. Supposedly stable and already constituted social groups—"Women," "Blacks," "Workers," "Lesbians"—are so often falsely universalized, the particular presented as the universal ("all the women are white [middle class, heterosexual], all the blacks are [heterosexual] men"), marginalizing the excluded. In an era of relatively safe, protected faculty study groups and e-mail discussion lists on "race, class, gender" it may be difficult to recall or imagine just how much opposition and resistance (to put it mildly) someone like Williams faced in raising issues of, for example, racism and sexism among white workers, sexism and homophobia among Black men, and racism and classism among feminists and in the gay community, especially when the discriminating subjects are endowed with agency and intentionality. Williams rejected the idea that, for example, white worker racism is due to false perceptions, instead considering the possibility that white workers have a real material interest in racism and actively participate in the reproduction and perpetuation of racial domination.

An entire book, much less an article, could be written on these issues alone and still not cover all the slippery slopes, but we need to get to the method, history, theory, and policy, so we will leave these as questions raised, as context. But I cannot but imagine the ways Professor Williams might have seized on the issues raised in this introduction, unpacking and

deconstructing them from various angles: In what ways has my privilege as a White Middle-Class Heterosexual European Male empowered my decisions to major in Black Studies or practice Buddhism—or to write an article with this title? Is it not the case that no matter how anti-racist and anti-sexist I am, I still benefit from being a white male? Is there no significance even to the ways I have chosen to describe myself—why “anti-sexist” instead of “feminist”; why not “anti-heterosexist?” As Williams argued, “our endeavors must engage these complexities constructively or they will run the real and present danger of remaining woefully incomplete.”³

METHOD

Williams had a long-time and deep interest in methodological issues. In her research and in her classes she discussed everyone from Popper and Caldwell to Harding and Resnick and Wolf. Her critiques of standard and alternative (Marxian or radical) theories of discrimination always included methodological discussions, and some of her articles were primarily methodological in focus.

In one early paper, Williams noted the:

. . . disturbing gap between the espoused methodological principles of neoclassical economists and the actual methods used by those who conduct and evaluate research in labor economics . . . ⁴

and argued in another that “[e]conomists’ lack of systematic exposure to the broad domain of the philosophy of science has had dire consequences.”⁵ Mainstream economists claim to be falsificationists, but Williams pointed out that Friedman’s instrumentalism is not identical to the modern positivism espoused by contemporary logical empiricists. Yes, they agree that scientific theories should provide adequate predictions, but logical empiricists insist that explanation is an important part of scientific practice and are concerned with the truth value of assumptions.

By the end of 1987, Kuhn, Lakatos, Blaug, and Hausman were joined by references to Edward Said, Spivak, Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, and even Derrida in Williams’ teaching and research. Williams saw Marxist (not to mention neoclassical and other) approaches to discrimination as not paying sufficient attention to the economic and non-economic practices that produce and reproduce gendered, race-conscious workers, and she saw poststructuralism and feminist theory as potentially providing

the “analytic means to the end of developing a richer theory of race and gender subjectification, agency, and ‘class interests.’”⁶

In developing an alternative methodological approach to both the mainstream and radical approaches, Williams embraced the “overdetermination” interpretation of Marx as in Resnick and Wolff’s work. I recall Williams’ pleasure when I told her that I never really understood the sentence in Marx that reads “[t]he concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations” until I studied with her. Williams’ approach is particularly interesting given that she combined the “Rethinking Marxist” methodological stance with a classical Marxist theoretical framework (associated with Shaikh and early Semmler), elaborated and extended with feminist theory. The Rethinking Marxist orientation mediated her use of classical Marxist political economy and poststructuralist and feminist theories.

HISTORY

History was extremely important for Rhonda Williams. In her course on Race and Class (really Race, Class, and Gender) at the New School, we spent a good deal of time on the relation between the rise and development of capitalism and the origins of racism (and race antagonism), and the relation of both to (changing) patriarchal relations. Key here for Williams, as far as capitalism and racism, was the work of Eric Williams, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Harry Chang, and Cornel West. Eric Williams and Cox both presented a story that was, for Williams, too reductionist, economic determinist. But I think it is very well to recall Cornel West’s comment that for all the problems of the traditional Marxist economic determinist view, even that determinist reductionist view is preferable to the bourgeois explanation of racism and the relation of race and class.

Fortunately, however, there is an alternative to both economic determinism and bourgeois social science: a modified and expanded Marxist approach that is anti- or non-essentialist. Such an approach recognizes the importance of both discursive and non-discursive structures. So the Eric Williams-Walter Rodney-Oliver Cox thesis on the non-discursive structures is elaborated and extended with the analysis of discursive structures in West’s chapter on “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” in his *Prophecy Deliverance!*. Here I would add that the work of scholars such as Marimba Ani/Dona Richards on European cultural and ideological roots of racism complement West’s analysis very nicely.⁷ On the one hand, there are theories of the origins of race antagonism and exploita-

tion and racism (and in this approach these two phenomena—racism and race antagonism—are carefully distinguished) that look to the origins of colonial capitalism for their basis. On the other hand are theories that investigate the role of European discourse, mythology, and ethos in the formation of racism. While certain formulations of these two approaches may be incompatible with one another, Williams argued that a rigorous and comprehensive development of a theory of the origins of racism demands a carefully constructed synthesis of the two.

Williams argued against the primordialist theories of racism of Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils using the Eric Williams-Oliver Cox material and then extended that material with West's work on European values, norms, attitudes, and aesthetic ideals. Williams also noted Sandra Harding's "curious coincidence" between Afrocentric and feminist work on the origins of racism and patriarchy, in particular the role of the rise of modern science with Descartes and Bacon.

The origin of racism and patriarchy was not the only place where history was important for Rhonda Williams. She also did work on the periodization of African-American history, the history of labor unions (here influenced heavily by Herbert Hill's important work), and careful studies of several periods in the post-WWII United States. While Williams' research centered on the U.S., she took a comparative approach, and often referred to case studies from around the globe. Her graduate students were required to conduct in-depth research on at least one other country or region, such as South Africa under apartheid, Brazil, or Israel/Palestine.

THEORY

Williams' theoretical approach to the analysis of racial and gender wage and employment differentials was firmly in the classical Marxist tradition. She participated in the revival and reinterpretation of the Classical and Marxian analysis of competition, as distinct from both the neoclassical analysis of perfect competition and the monopoly capital school. Here it is noteworthy that she (along with Darity) seems to have pinpointed the importance of this alternative theory of competition independently of the work of Shaikh and Semmler on the one hand, and people like Eatwell and Clifton on the other.⁸ But Williams then came to the New School, where Shaikh and Semmler and Eatwell and their students were working on these issues. I remember that, both when Willi Semmler earned tenure (primarily for his *Competition, Monopoly, and*

Differential Profit Rates) and Howard Botwinick successfully defended his dissertation (on *Wage Differentials and the Competition of Capitals*), Williams expressed the feeling that there was a place for her in academia. She saw these as affirmations of her work. I also recall that when she was leaving the New School, still an Assistant Professor after ten years in academia, she said she was going to give it one more shot at the University of Maryland, and if she could not earn tenure there she would consider it the end of the road in the academy.⁹ My understanding is that although she went as a dual appointment in Economics and Afro-American Studies, she ultimately earned tenure in Afro-American Studies only. So she did find her place in the academy, but not in economics. That says something about the discipline.¹⁰

I won't review the whole analysis of competition, the reserve army, and so on here, but it should be pointed out that Williams was working at a slightly lower level of abstraction than Shaikh and Botwinick. They derived the theoretical possibilities of and limits to wage differentials in capitalist economies from the analysis of competition, regulating capitals, and so on, but she also "filled in" the high theory by outlining the ways in which gender and race mediated the distribution of the working class among the high paid and low paid, the employed and the unemployed, the cyclically employed and the permanently unemployed, and so on. Intra-class competition was the focus, and its omission the critique of the divide and conquer school and other theories of discrimination and inequality. It is not an exaggeration to state that this work of Williams (along with Darity and Mason) is among the most important—if not *the* most important—in all of *applied* Marxist economics.

POLICY

Rhonda Williams was involved in policy debates, issuing policy papers through various institutes and foundations, and publishing newspaper editorials on current affairs. In a 1990 paper issued by the Joint Center for Policy Studies, she reaffirmed her belief that affirmative action, by itself, would not be satisfactory to address racial economic inequality. Without increasing the aggregate number of jobs, it remains a game of musical chairs. "Economic democracy," she wrote, "suggests more cogent solutions."¹¹

Williams was also interested in the cultural meanings and ideological implications of policy debates, which, she argued, "function to relegitimize the existent unequal race and gender distribution of the fruits of citizen-

ship.”¹² In the context of continued market discrimination and white male dominance, the backlash on affirmative action may seem unnecessary, but by raising questions about the qualifications of African Americans it serves to reaffirm for white men with good jobs the belief that their privilege is deserved, while sending a message to those whites who are struggling economically that Blacks may be responsible for their situation. The debates over “welfare reform” also contribute to the reproduction of racist attitudes and ideologies, taking the attention off of competitive capitalism’s increasing inability to provide economic security for all.

Williams did not claim to have all the answers. But her policy work identifies some of the hurdles that must be overcome if we are to ever move toward a society free from the dehumanizing forms of inequality that continue to plague us:

What would it take to make us part of the community? I’m not sure. I have no quick fix. I do not know the sufficient condition. But I will name what I believe is a necessary condition: We must attend to the unfinished business. We must come out of the racial closet and confront the cultural, political and economic legacies of white racism. We must do so in ways that critically address class, gender, nationality and sexuality. We must do so in ways that name the psychological, economic and social fear involved for whites in identifying too closely with black lives. And we must do so in ways that allow each of us to choose the path toward reconciliation and a full embracing of one another’s humanity.¹²

THE LEGACY

Rhonda Williams left an important body of work—her collected papers need to be published. Her colleagues and students have benefited greatly from her contributions, her energy, her commitment, and her standards of excellence. This paper is not in any way a comprehensive summary of her work—this remains to be done. Important omissions include a discussion of her empirical work—first-rate and imaginatively-precise technically—and her work on the economics of sexual orientation. Rhonda Williams was a tremendous role model for every scholar-activist. She called herself an “intellectual worker,” and until the end of her life she expended her labor power for the cause of social and eco-

conomic justice. The greatest tribute to her memory would be to continue that work, with the same crystal clear vision and generous spirit. "Much work remains to be done."¹⁴

NOTES

1. *AUTHOR'S NOTE*: The author studied with Professor Williams at the New School for Social Research in 1988–89, and was the last student to do a Ph.D. field in Race and Class there under her supervision. Despite the subtitle, this paper is neither a comprehensive overview nor an in-depth study of Williams' work.

2. Williams, Rhonda M. "Race, Deconstruction, and the Emergent Agenda of Feminist Economic Theory." In *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*, edited by Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, 148. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

3. *Ibid.*, 148.

4. Williams, Rhonda M. "The Methodology and Practice of Modern Labor Economics: A Critique." In *Labor Economics: Modern Views*, edited by W. A. Darity, Jr., 23–24.

5. Williams, Rhonda M. "Culture as Human Capital: Methodological and Policy Implications." *Praxis International* 7 (2) (July, 1987): 154.

6. Williams, Rhonda M. "Consenting to Whiteness: Reflections on Race and Marxian Theories of Discrimination." In *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*, edited by A. Callari, S. Cullenberg, and C. Biewener, 301. New York: Guilford Press, 1995.

7. Williams was disturbed by what she saw as patriarchy and heterosexism, paternalism and essentialism, among Black cultural nationalists; see Williams, Rhonda M. "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender." In *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, edited by W. Lubiano. New York: Pantheon, 1997. This may have resulted in an underappreciation of the ways in which African-centered scholarship anticipated many of the insights associated with the postmodern turn. I lament never having had the chance to discuss this, or recent African-centered feminist scholarship, with Professor Williams.

8. See Darity, Jr., William A. and Rhonda M. Williams. "Peddlers Forever?: Culture, Competition, and Discrimination." *American Economic Review* 75 (2) (1985): 256–61; Williams, Rhonda M. "Capital, Competition, and Discrimination: A Reconsideration of Racial Earnings Inequality." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 19 (2) (1987): 1–15. Other than Marx and Sraffa, the only citation referring to this alternative conceptualization of competition in these two articles is Weeks. Compare this with Williams, Rhonda M. "Competition, Discrimination, and Differential Wage Rates: On the Continued Relevance of Marxian Theory to the Analysis of Earnings and Employment Inequality." In *New Approaches to Economic and Social Analyses of Discrimination*, edited by R. Cornwall and P. Wunnavu. New York: Praeger, 1991; and Williams, Rhonda M., and Robert E. Kenison. "The Way We Were?: Discrimination, Competition, and Inter-Industry Wage Differentials in 1970." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 28 (2) (1996): 1–32.

9. Williams kept her sense of humor in the face of serious frustration. She told us that when she attended her first faculty meeting at the New School, she looked around and figured that there must have been a meeting of the African American faculty scheduled for the same time that no one had told her about. She soon learned that she *was* the African American faculty! Despite its 'leftist' credentials, Williams

felt marginalized in the Economics Department, where the tenured faculty were all male, and mostly all white. Being the only faculty member assigned an office in a separate area away from the rest of the department, in a little nook around the corner, didn't help. The main reason she gave for leaving the New School, however, was the lack of Black students.

10. Sam Myers has made the point that Williams would have earned tenure had she stayed at the New School, and could have earned tenure in the Economics Department at Maryland, but chose to move full-time in Afro-American Studies, because of her teaching and research interests. I hope he is right. In any case, my point is not that she was anything other than fully qualified—she was a *brilliant economist*.

11. Williams, Rhonda M. (with Nina M. Mahone). "Beyond Bad Luck: The Racial Dimensions of Deindustrialization." Washington, DC: Joint Center for Policy Studies, 1990.

12. Peterson, Carla, and Rhonda M. Williams. "The Color of Memory: Interpreting 20th Century Social Policy from a 19th Century Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 24 (1) (Spring, 1998). See also, Williams, Rhonda M. "Culturally Bereft, Naturally Unfit: African Americans and the Current Social Policy." *Journal of Intergroup Relations* XXIII (4) (1996-97): 3-8.

13. Williams, Rhonda M. "Unfinished Business: African-American Political Economy During the Age of 'Color-Blind' Politics." In *The State of Black America 1999*, 150-51. Washington, DC: National Urban League, 1999.

14. Williams. "Consenting to Whiteness," 306.

