

ARTS &amp; CULTURE BOOKS SPRING LITERARY REVIEW 2020 ISSUE

# How Catholic theology helped me understand Thomas Chatterton Williams' controversial take on race

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**Olga Segura**April 24, 2020

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It is difficult to categorize Thomas Chatterton Williams.

The 39-year-old writer, a self-identified liberal, does not necessarily display the inclinations associated with the label. Since the publication of his memoir, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape From the Crowd*, in 2009, Williams has become one of the fiercest and most prolific critics of identity politics in the United States. Most notably, in an op-ed for The New York Times in 2017, he criticized the author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, claiming that Coates “mirrors ideas of race—specifically the specialness of whiteness—that white supremacist thinkers cherish.”

Williams takes his criticisms of identity politics further in his 2019 book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, a look into the author's attempt to confront the ways that Americans define identity and race. He acknowledges that his parents, a black father and white mother, raised him and his brother in a home that was “an unequivocally *black* household.” His daughter's birth, however, forced him to reconsider what is meant when a person identifies as black or white. In *Self-Portrait*, he urges readers to move beyond a black-white binary.

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"I have spent my whole life earnestly believing the fundamental American dictum that a single 'drop of black blood' makes a person 'black' primarily because they can never be 'white,'" Williams writes. "Before my daughter, Marlow, was born that night in Paris, I'd never remotely questioned the idea that, when the time came to have them, my children would be 'black' like me.... Blackness as an either/or truth was so fundamental to my self-conception that I'd never rigorously reflected on its foundations."

### **A Writer of Many Contradictions**

The reception of Williams's controversial work has been heated. One reviewer described him as "a man born to be Incoherent"; another described the author's work as a crucial contribution to the conversation around race in America. Darryl Pinckney, in the March 26, 2020, issue of The New York Review of Books, writes that because "others [are] giving whiteness too much value," in order "to strike a balance," Williams has chosen to "devalue blackness."

I first came across Williams's work on Twitter, when a commentator used *Losing My Cool* to support his claim that hip-hop music was detrimental to black and brown communities. I read the 2009 memoir and *Self-Portrait* back to back in just a few weeks. I followed up by reading his articles for The New Yorker, The Tablet, The London Review of Books and Harper's. I found myself challenged and fascinated by a man who has written a memoir about abandoning the hip-hop culture of his youth, one of the best essays on Drake I have ever read and a profile on Spike Lee, followed by a book arguing for the unlearning of race.

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I found that there is a tension that Williams is well aware of, particularly as a writer living in the digital age. Along with his writing, he seems committed to authentically engaging with others, especially his critics, on Twitter. “I really love the way that it allows the immediacy of, for those of us trying to be writers, not just to participate in the discourse but hopefully shape it,” he told me in an interview in February.

“But it also puts things in such binaries, and it turns things into a kind of team dynamic in a way that I think is really against what it means to be a writer,” he said. “I really think a writer is alone and not against other people but certainly not trying to score points to gain applause through likes and retweets in a way that’s really unhealthy with Twitter.”

For writers, he tells me, the process of creating a book or writing a long magazine article is a disproportionate act. A writer can spend months or years on a project that might take the average reader a day or week to get through. This disparity is intensified on platforms like Twitter, where readers can share any criticisms they might have instantly and directly with an author. I asked Williams if this relationship created on social media between reader and writer has ever caused him to doubt an article or book.

“I was not concerned that people would disagree with me. I think that’s actually really healthy and fine, and I really think things have been dialectically like, ‘You put out a point. I respond to that point. And then we synthesize into a new and better point.’ That’s great,” he said. “But I was worried that people would either accidentally or, what has happened in certain instances, willfully misconstrue what I was trying to say, read it in the least generous possible way, kind of project motives onto me, psychologize what I’m saying. You open yourself to the critique of, ‘Oh, you’re a self-hating black person. That’s fine. Why are you trying to make an argument about race?’”

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While he expected such criticisms, he still finds them disturbing. “I believe that a lot of minority writers stress about whether they get pigeonholed in writing about identity stuff, like you can’t write about other things.” But he says he is less concerned with being pigeonholed and more interested in contributing to the ways we talk about race in American society.

While Williams does not write with critics in mind, I wondered how he feels about readers, like the one who introduced me to Williams’s work online, who use his words to justify stereotypes about black Americans. “I really don’t try to write for these types of people that can agree with you for the wrong reasons either,” he said. “That sometimes makes me feel more uncomfortable, a certain type of conservative reader who wants to applaud being a black person that isn’t antagonistic or something like that. That’s not what motivates me at all.”

“I think I have a few things to say that could be valuable in the conversation,” Williams continued. “And so any kind of negative feedback or disagreement—it doesn’t really deter me.”

## Unlearning Race

In *Self-Portrait* Williams argues that “there is no such thing, on any measurable scientific level, as distinct races of the species *Homo sapiens*,” adding that human beings make inferences, based on “our own geographical and cultural orientations, about other people and ourselves based on the loose interplay of physical traits, language, custom, and nationality, all of which lack any fixed or universal meaning.”

It was not until Williams moved to France, he claims, that he realized that “our identities really are a constant negotiation between the story we tell about ourselves and the narrative our societies like to recite, between the face we see in the mirror

and the image recognized by the people and institutions that happen to surround us." This need to define ourselves, he says, has led to a "racial sickness plaguing our national life."

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While many have been critical of his call to "unlearn race," Williams argues that this idea has already been suggested by writers like James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. "Race is a delusion, and it's a duty of ours to dispel," he says. "There's no such thing as black or white, and to acquiesce to these terms is to acquiesce [to] your own destruction."

What does it mean for Americans to move beyond race? First, people have to spend time learning their own history, he says, using resources like 23andMe, a home-based saliva kit that can help determine one's ancestry, to better understand where they come from. This would also allow us to more adequately define who we are. Rather than someone declaring he or she is white, learning one's history would allow him or her to say where in Europe his or her ancestors are from. Second, U.S. society must stop being so segregated and allow people of different races to fully engage with one another. "Racism is a perceptive error," he said, "and what you actually have to do is you have to get into spaces where you're meeting people and perceiving them as human beings and not as racial stereotypes and myths."

Is there a difference between the kind of unlearning that white Americans have to do and a comparable unlearning needed by black Americans? White people, Williams stated, have to do two things. First, they have to become informed about the ways they were racialized. Second, he said, "they have to think of themselves as 'raced' in order to then think past that and reject it and see it for the illusion it is." He adds, "You cannot get to that illusion state by just thinking that you have no race and you're invisible. You have to understand what whiteness means, absolutely."

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But by unlearning race as we know it, I ask him, would we as a society be in danger of negating black culture and the ways that we define what it means to be black in America? “I don’t think so,” Williams responds, because “these are traditions that communities have created and upheld and honored but there’s nothing inherent in the person about it.” He believes that regardless of one’s identity, individuals can take part in any aspect of human culture, describing this idea as humanistic. “So I think that if you just think like, ‘What do I like? What did I grow up with? What do I want to pass on to my children?’” he said. “It’s a kind of music, it’s a kind of literature, it’s a kind of even way of talking, it’s a kind of way of slapping hands, it’s a kind of way of dancing. All that can be held onto without believing that there’s anything racial about it.”

### **Building an Appealing Future**

As a 30-year-old, left-leaning, Afro-Latina immigrant trying to engage with Williams’s work, I find his call to move past race and labels challenging. There was power for communities like mine in embracing terms like *black* or *Afro-Latinx*. If we were not capable of setting ourselves apart from white Americans with these distinctions, would we lose the representation and power we have historically struggled to achieve in the 21st century?

I realized that it was easier for me to understand Williams’s argument by reading it through a theological lens. As Catholics, we are called to envision the kind of racially transcendent world that Williams seems to be envisioning, one in which we are asked to think beyond our political parties and prioritize the behaviors and attitudes Jesus embodies in the Gospel. And in Williams’s words, I found some similarities to the works of black theologians I admire—like the Rev. Bryan

Massingale, who, in his pivotal 2010 book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, also described the need for white Americans to acknowledge their racial particularity.

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When I mentioned this to the author, he tells me that while he was not thinking about theology while writing *Self-Portrait*, he is not surprised that his work can be read in this way, pointing to Dr. King's vision of the Christian mountaintop. "For me, what disturbs me about some of the conversations on the left is that you get the impression that times are so divisive, that there's so much discomfort with what Trump has exposed, that some people on the left don't actually have the goal of a kind of racially transcendent future," he said. "They don't want that. They actually want a kind of separation and think that some people are irredeemable and that divisions are irredeemable and unbridgeable. That has to be an anti-Christian view, and that's also, I think, not an appealing future for me. That future is not an appealing one with our God."

Williams grew up with a devoutly Protestant mother and attended a Catholic high school in New Jersey before attending Georgetown University, where he studied philosophy. While faith has not played an explicit role in his work, he tells me that he has had a "very Jesuit upbringing" and points to writers like Aquinas and Augustine who helped him understand how to argue. "St. Augustine and his *Confessions*, that was a really inspirational book for me. And that's the first memoir written in many ways but also the first memoir that made an impression on me and kind of modeled how you use your life to get at larger questions," he said. "So maybe there's a kind of Catholic and continental influence on the form and the way that I go about attacking questions."

Williams demonstrates that black and brown citizens do not form a monolithic block and cannot be placed into a neat binary. He also demonstrates that the role of a writer in 2020 is a complicated one. “The purpose of the writer is not activism,” he told me. “It’s not the same thing as expressing solidarity or shoring up the team. It’s just trying to, to the best of your abilities, engage with contemporary problems and try to see things clearly, even if that takes you on inconvenient paths.”

*This article also appeared in print, under the headline “A Fierce Critic of Identity Politics,” in the Spring Literary Review 2020, issue.*

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