



1995

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Recommended Citation

Palekar, S., Black women on the frontline of the fight for racial justice : Evelyn Williams' Inadmissible evidence, *Law Text Culture*, 2, 1995, 247-249.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol2/iss1/15>

Black women on the frontline of the fight for racial justice : Evelyn Williams' Inadmissible evidence

Abstract

Evelyn Williams's *Inadmissible Evidence* is an amazingly powerful and moving autobiography which charts a magnificent political, psychological, spiritual and philosophical journey. The text cannot fail to have far reaching consequences for a variety of writers and readers, as it speaks clearly and compellingly about extremely complex and painful issues like racism, sexism, discrimination, harassment and minoritisation of people, dominant legal discourses and concepts of "Justice" that often work to uphold the status quo and obliterate those already oppressed because of their race, ethnicity, poverty and gender. It is evident that Evelyn Williams's upbringing, and the love and support she receives from her parents give her the strength to face and overcome the toxic levels of racism and sexism that she encounters. She and her niece JoAnne Chesimard (later known as Assata Shakur), have been socialised from birth to believe in themselves, to believe that their opinions are important, that they have rights, that they are right, that they are a part and product of a long tradition of strong, proud Black women. Thus the autobiography highlights the importance of a strong sense of community, and the significant role that it plays in the survival and success of oppressed minorities. Evelyn Williams's and Assata Shakur's inner strength, fierce will and determination ultimately enables them to rebel against the strictures that are placed on them for their crimes of being Black and female in a White supremacist, patriarchal society. Though their rebellion is expressed in different ways - Shakur steps outside society by becoming a revolutionary, while Williams subverts the legal system from within - their common aim of Black liberation makes their bond even stronger than the blood-bond that already exists, that of aunt and niece.

BLACK WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE OF THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE: EVELYN WILLIAMS' *INADMISSIBLE EVIDENCE*

Shalmalee Palekar

Evelyn Williams's *Inadmissible Evidence* is an amazingly powerful and moving autobiography which charts a magnificent political, psychological, spiritual and philosophical journey. The text cannot fail to have far reaching consequences for a variety of writers and readers, as it speaks clearly and compellingly about extremely complex and painful issues like racism, sexism, discrimination, harassment and minoritisation of people, dominant legal discourses and concepts of "Justice" that often work to uphold the status quo and obliterate those already oppressed because of their race, ethnicity, poverty and gender. It is evident that Evelyn Williams's upbringing, and the love and support she receives from her parents give her the strength to face and overcome the toxic levels of racism and sexism that she encounters. She and her niece JoAnne Chesimard (later known as Assata Shakur), have been socialised from birth to believe in themselves, to believe that their opinions are important, that they have rights, that they *are right*, that they are a part and product of a long tradition of strong, proud Black women. Thus the autobiography highlights the importance of a strong sense of community, and the significant role that it plays in the survival and success of oppressed minorities. Evelyn Williams's and Assata Shakur's inner strength, fierce will and determination ultimately enables them to rebel against the strictures that are placed on them for their crimes of being Black and female in a White supremacist, patriarchal society. Though their rebellion is expressed in different ways — Shakur steps outside society by becoming a revolutionary, while Williams subverts the legal system from within — their common aim of Black liberation makes their bond even stronger than the blood-bond that already exists, that of aunt and niece.

In negotiating her subjectivity Evelyn Williams successfully juggles

many different positions and roles such as daughter, Black woman, student, aunt, lawyer and political activist. She details the difficulties and hardships she faces in order to become a Black (female) lawyer, and in the process of charting her own and her niece's struggles, she also foregrounds the fact that a multiplicity of voices and facets of many women are suppressed due to their daily struggle for survival, thus denying them access to important institutional resources.

The issues of censorship, political game-playing and misuse of the media are also mapped out boldly by Evelyn Williams, exposing not only the high levels of racism and corruption in the "unbiased" Police Force and "free" Press, but indeed, the systemic suppression of radical political ideologies and practices. It is chilling to read how the American Government deliberately fanned mass hysteria and perpetuated racial stereotypes by constantly portraying the Black Liberation Army and The Black Panthers as "Cop-killers" and bank robbers. It is even more terrifying to see how easily (and viciously) evidence was manufactured and used to incriminate Assata Shakur. Of course it is always easier for a regime to murder or imprison politically dissident people than it is to interrogate its own power structures, or accept responsibility for slavery, disenfranchisement and centuries of oppression, which operate to this day in more subtle forms. American society conveniently seems to forget that for every white policeman killed or injured, there are thousands of brutal American Black (and working - class white) deaths in custody.

Evelyn Williams dedicates *Inadmissible Evidence* to "... all political prisoners, wherever they are confined within the mirrored noon of the dead." In her view, all Black prisoners are political prisoners – a view that will no doubt raise quite a few hackles. But it is a view which demonstrates that to her, the personal *is* the political, that any disjunction between the personal and political selves, between theory and practice, is an artificial one. Though she has now become famous for defending the notorious Assata Shakur, her commitment on all levels to her people is as strong in earlier cases, despite her own financial struggles, she constantly takes on poverty-stricken clients and "lost" causes.

The autobiography is written in a lucid and compact style, combining enormous amounts of information with all the excitement and suspense of a great court-room trial. This is a passionate, angry, sometimes despairing book which maintains its intensity of feeling and depth of analysis from beginning to end. Evelyn Williams gives us a sense of hope that it is possible to rise from the ashes, carry on the crusade for justice and refuse to be a passive victim of American society, while not denying the horrors of this society, or compromising one's personal and political integrity. As Haywood Burns says:

Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once declared that life is action and passion and that one must share the actions and passions of one's times or be deemed not to have lived. Judged by this standard, Evelyn Williams has lived and lived greatly. (Foreword, p. viii.)