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The Color Wheel

From a personal perspective, a UB Law professor takes on the artificiality of race

I remember one time in particular, after the cab I was in crashed into the car in front, then backed into the one behind. A policeman stopped to help. He took down the story. As he was taking down my name and address, I noticed that he had checked the "white" box. "Officer," I said politely, "you made an error on your form. I am not white. I am black." He gave me a long, bored look, decided not to discuss it, and said, "Sure, lady. If you say so." If I say so? If I say so! As if it were my idea!

That sort of thing has happened to Judy Scales-Trent more times than she cares to remember. By virtue of who she is and what she looks like, she challenges every assumption about race, every neat little box that America has created to make sense of the colors it sees.

Scales-Trent is black. Her skin is white.

Sometimes people can't deal with that.

"I've struggled for years to realize that it's not me who's distorted, it's society's distortion," she says.

The UB Law School professor addresses that distortion in a compelling book of essays, *Notes of a White Black Woman* (Penn State Press, \$19.50). Subtitled "Race, Color, Community," the book builds

on a classic essay she published in 1979, "Commonalities," about the life experiences of a black woman with white skin. In that essay, she compared her situation to that of a lesbian woman deciding whether to make her sexual orientation known:

I know why they must come out. They must be clear about who they are, and one way to do this is to force other people to see who they are. As I do. This is also why I "come out." And, with them, I brace myself for the flinch, the startled look, the anxious intake of breath, the wary eye. I come out to white people to say to them: "Beware. I am Other. Proceed with caution." And I come out to black people — how painful it is to have to do it, to say: "I am family. You are safe with me. I am you."

Scales-Trent's teaching and research has focused on the 14th Amendment and its application to standards on race and gender — "what happens at the intersection of race and gender issues," as she summarizes it. Too often, she says, courts have focused on racial issues without taking gender into account. "They fail to notice," she says, "that some people are both black and women; they're not discrete categories."

She joined the UB Law faculty from a career in civil rights work in Washington, D.C. But as she went about her teaching and research in Buffalo, she knew that there was more to be said about racial identity. She started writing, and writing, and writing.

"I love banging out a first draft and then polishing and polishing it, 10 or 15 versions," she says. "It's like going out and getting the clay — then I can shape it. I love words, I love reading stories."

Not that the writing was easy. "I'd look at the work of a summer, and at the end of the summer I'd have four essays, maybe five pages apiece. And I'd think, 'This is America — you're supposed to be doing 300 pages at a time!'"

And unavoidably, the book dredged up deep feelings of pain. One essay, for example, discusses the etymology of the word "mulatto." It comes, she discovered, from the Spanish for "young mule" — the stubborn, sterile offspring of a horse and a donkey. She called the essay "On Being Like a Mule."

A correspondent for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked whether she was writing out of bitterness. "It's not for me to say what the reader should get out of the book," Scales-Trent says. "But people who are stigmatized are angry about it. There are 36 million angry black people in this country. How could anyone be surprised by that?"

From the introduction to *Notes of a White Black Woman*:

"Race" is not a biological fact but a social construct — and a clumsy one, at that. Stories about my life as a white black American also show that creating and maintaining a racial identity takes a lot of effort on my part, and

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on the part of other Americans. "Race" is not something that just exists. It is a continuing act of imagination. It is a very demanding verb.

"I think that America doesn't understand both truths," she says of the concept of race. "They know it's really, really real, but they don't know it's really, really not real."

But isn't the social construct that we call race necessary in making sense of the world, in organizing society, in finding affinities?

"I don't mind social constructs so much unless people die from them and children starve from them," Scales-Trent says. "And that's what happens in the black community. It's not that people don't die because of that social construct." She writes:

Choosing up sides means buying into the craziness of American-style racism. For there are many black Americans with white ancestors, and there are plenty of white Americans with black family members. ... If one has been placed in the middle of everything that is going on, why not enjoy it? And I do. I am as moved by Schubert's Trout Quartet as I am by the songs of Sweet Honey in the Rock. I weep when I hear a choir sing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and I am filled with joy when I hear Puccini's "Messa di Gloria." I embrace all the treasures these two cultures offer me. Why choose less, when one could have more? And why cheat our children out of all this richness?

In the book, Scales-Trent also broaches the difficult issue of skin color within the black community. "The common take on light-skinned black people," she says, "is, 'They think they're better than us.' It's really just a replication of what goes on in the larger community."

And she notes again that women of color are the most trapped by racist categorization. "The image of beauty, for women, is so powerful," she says. "Men can compensate for dark skin by getting an MBA from Harvard, by being a millionaire football player. You can get a blond wife. But there's no way for women to compensate."

Near the end of *Notes of a White Black Woman*, Scales-Trent places a long essay called "An Ordinary Day," about her visit to the home and family of a former student who is a member of the Iroquois Cayuga Tribe. The warmth and richness she found in that place and among those people has stayed with her, she writes, as a reminder that behind every "ordinary day" there exist the surprises and gifts of our neighbors, forever waiting to be discovered.

"I wanted to end with something affirming," she says. "I didn't want to lead people somewhere and not show them a way out of it. ... I think the theme of the book is not so much bitterness, but how one can build community. It's the theme of all my work. That's all I do all the time. That's how I understand my work."

From the book:

I add one final complication to a very clear question. Remember that the American rule of racial purity states that Americans who can trace any ancestry back to Africa are black, African American. Then remember that all the people in this country started out on their journey to America from Africa. The result is startling, but cannot be escaped. Those Americans who call themselves white are all pretending to be something else — "passing." But they deny her to no avail. For Mother Africa is mother to us all. And we are all African Americans. ■

What some reviewers have said about *Notes of a White Black Woman*:

Martha Minow, Harvard Law School: "The book's thought experiments and its intimate accounts of lived experiences demonstrate both the arbitrariness of racial categories and their real weight in people's lives. At turns gentle and angry, awed and critical, this is must reading for anyone interested in identity, race relations, civil rights, and the avenues for personal fulfillment."

Patricia Bell-Scott, editor of Life Notes: Personal Writing by Contemporary Black Women: "In this powerful collection of life-writing, we see our sister coming home to herself and to us. In doing so, she places the 'color complex' squarely on the table. We owe it to her to join the dialogue."

The Buffalo News: "Scales-Trent thinks deeply about a world that clings to racial stereotypes, even though there are generations of white Africans and black Germans and blond Navajos. That's why her writing tends to focus on similarities, ways to unite rather than polarize people."

Booklist: "These stunningly powerful essays call upon experiences utterly personal yet distinctly universal. With a goal no less compelling than what she terms 'a new kind of community,' Scales-Trent proves to be a teacher of remarkable humanity and great clarity of thought."