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Why a novelist shifted to essays about the ‘disorientation’ of being Black in the world

BY STUART MILLER

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Ian Williams' new book is "Disorientation: Being Black in the World."
(Justin Morris)

ON THE SHELF

Disorientation: Being Black in the World

By Ian Williams

Europa: 224 pages, \$20

Whenever Ian Williams heads to his car, the [novelist](#) and poet makes sure to have his keys at the ready, repeatedly unlocking the door from a distance with the remote. This, Williams's notes in "[Disorientation](#)," his collection of essays on race and the oft-overlooked toll of persistent racism, is simply what a Black man has to do lest he be mistaken for a thief.

"The worst thing would be to reach the door unprepared, fumbling for my keys while white people look at me suspiciously over their shoulders," Williams writes. During a recent video interview he gave a real-world example: Two nights earlier, in a Home Depot parking lot, "I paced myself behind this other person so it wouldn't seem like I was stalking them to their car."

Born in Trinidad and raised largely in Canada, where he still lives, Williams is thoughtful and provocative in his writing but far from a fire-breathing polemicist. He is as happy (perhaps happier) spending a half-hour discussing tennis as he is explaining the psychological and emotional harm of having to constantly negotiate safe passage through a white world.

"Disorientation" does not delve deeply into events like the murder of [George Floyd](#) (though they helped inspire the book), instead focusing more on the daily traumas that impose themselves on Black people, and not just in the United States but in every white-dominated culture. In fact, Williams worries that the headline-grabbing violence against people like Floyd or [Ahmaud Arbery](#) allows white people to downplay the impact of, say, a professor being mocked by white students or a man getting stopped — and humiliated — by police without physical injury.

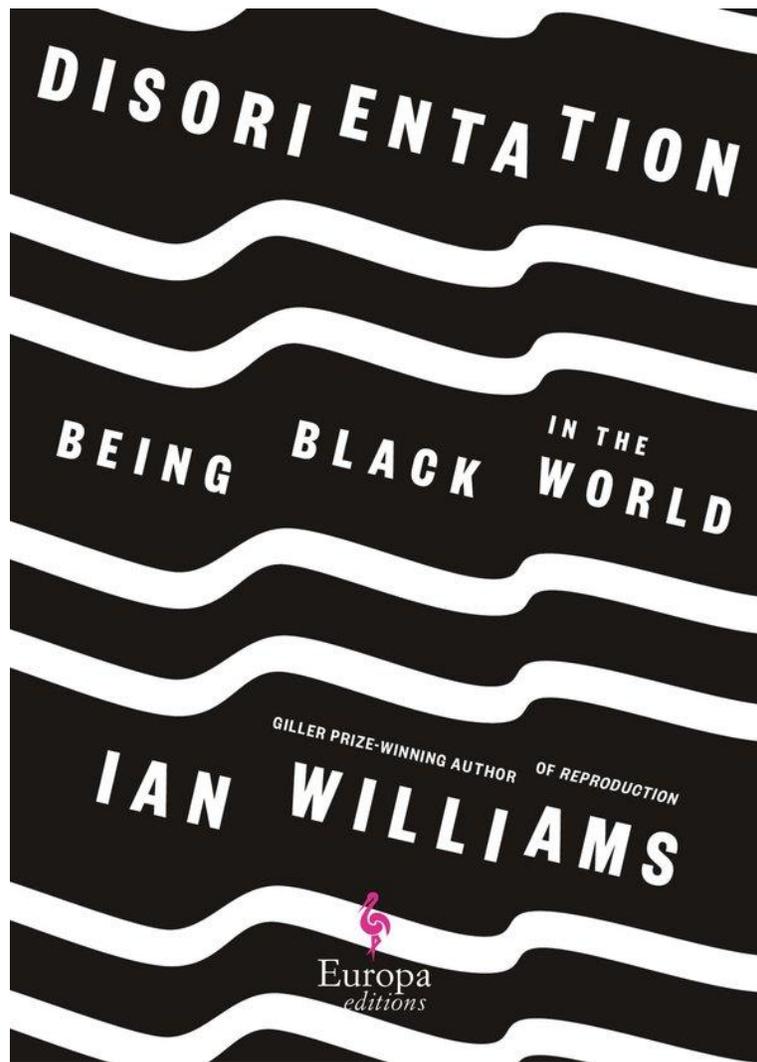
"I want to debunk the sensationalism and say there are degrees to racism — and it happens on various levels, not just the ways that are newsworthy," he says. "There's big work to do at the national activism level but there's also work to be done at the kitchen table." His interview with The Times has been edited for length and clarity.

What made you shift, as a writer of fiction and poetry, to these essays?

I was living in Vancouver last year, working on a novel, making good progress. But the pandemic [took] hold, and there were [all these fires](#), where it got so smoky you can't open your windows. And then, of course, the social justice movement around the murder of Black people. It really felt to me like the world was ending and I thought, "If there's one more book I have to write in my lifetime, would it be that novel?" No. I'd been pretty quiet for a long time, and it was no longer time to be quiet-slash-"good." It was time to be honest.

Was that a challenge for you?

I don't think of myself as a political person; I don't lead the parade in terms of activism. I'm coming at this as a literary writer. Black people are often seen as either a quiet and good one who doesn't rock the boat — people compliment you and say you sound white — or you are a loud, angry activist and people can't talk to you. Neither of those sits well with me. The first essay in the book is about coming to racial and political awareness, trying to find where you stand. I want the really large middle to find ways to talk about their experiences.



Europa Editions

You write, “It’s not that I find race in everything, but that race finds me.” So many white people complain that people of color are making a big deal of little things. Is it possible to open their minds to the toll of [microaggressions](#) combined with systemic racism?

Not everyone wants to deal. There’s an automatic defensiveness to the idea of whites being evil and Blacks being victimized. The question seems to be, “What are you going to do to compensate for the horrible things you’ve done as white people?” Who wants to be a part of that?

I’m not giving white folks a pass in any way, but on a human level who wants to enter an intellectual space where you’re deemed wrong and the enemy? It’s this erasure of nuance people are rejecting. They think, “I’m not evil, so things are fine, the laws are there to protect everybody, so what are you making such a big deal about this for?” With this book, my question for them is, “What is it you fear?” Don’t give me platitudes. What do you feel is unfair about how we’re going about this?

When you write, “disorientation stalls the forward momentum of your life,” is it the pain of each individual slight or the idea that, as you say, you have to don a suit of armor each day to brace yourself for the next one?

It’s the accumulation over a lifetime. I’m 42 and it’s very different than 22, when there was still a resilience and buoyancy. Now I feel the wear that my parents and other Black people have felt when they hit this age.

I’m exhausted because I’m constantly having to put on armor to defend myself. It’s that disorienting movement — preparing and then recovering — that adds an additional layer to just living.

Your niece and nephew are biracial. Does that make it more difficult for others to stereotype them?

If they can stay in that in-between space and refuse to move to either side, then that will help. I tend to be hopeful, but then I also think racism will just find new forms. My niece and nephew won’t have to deal with the irritations I faced because they’re from a generation that won’t put up with that. But I think there will be other racist underpinnings that will come in differently.

You rarely encounter other professors of color when you teach. How helpful would it be for changing attitudes if there were [greater diversity](#) in education?

I think some parents would be nervous in an all-white class if there was a Black teacher. There’d be an unconscious bias, a nervous wondering if she is as smart and qualified as other teachers. But I think it would be wonderful and I think it’s essential to see people of color in various roles in society. That’s especially true in those formative moments in elementary school when you spend a year with a teacher and bond with them.

When something happens out in the world, having a Black, Latino or Asian teacher in front of the room saying, “Today we’re not going to do our math lesson because we have to talk about something,” is more profound than any book and will stick with children when they get older.