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**White Innocence: Reflections on Public Debates and Political-Analytical Challenges. An Interview with Gloria Wekker**

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**Abstract**

This contribution is an interview with social and cultural anthropologist of Surinamese-Dutch background prof. dr. emerita Gloria Wekker. It discusses the debate that ensued in the Netherlands after the publication of her book *White Innocence* (2016), now translated in Dutch as *Witte onschuld* (2017). The interview covers the reception of the book, Wekker's future work, and her legacy for the academic as well as public debates about gender and race. It goes into methodological questions concerning intersectional analysis and the notion of race as a social construct.

**Keywords**

Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence*, race, intersectionality, colonialism, the Netherlands/Belgium, cultural archive

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Gloria Wekker is a social and cultural anthropologist of Surinamese-Dutch background with expertise in gender studies, Caribbean studies, and the study of sexuality, race/ethnicity and postcolonialism. She is professor emerita in Gender and Ethnicity at the Humanities Faculty

of Utrecht University. In 2016 Wekker published the book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke UP) about the social construction of race in Dutch culture and society. In her book, Wekker undermines the dominant narrative of the Netherlands as a “gentle” and “ethical” nation, by showing how the denial of racism and the expression of innocence regarding race safeguards white privilege. In November 2017, the Dutch translation *Witte Onschuld: Paradoxen van Kolonialisme en Ras* was published by Amsterdam University Press. This Dutch version includes a new chapter, “The Great Discomfort: Reception of *White Innocence*”. Nella van den Brandt, Amal Miri, Nawal Mustafa, and Lieke Schrijvers met Gloria Wekker in Amsterdam a few days prior to the publication of this Dutch translation. They spoke about the public debate sparked by Wekker’s work and reflected on developments since the publication of *White Innocence*. The interview furthermore provided an opportunity to reflect upon various methodological questions across several academic fields of discussion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was the outcome of extensive collaborative preparation by the four interviewers. Through reading and discussing Gloria Wekker’s work and organising the interview, we hoped to learn more about how we, variously situated in our own disciplines and contexts, could further develop the interdisciplinary and intersectional study of gender through rethinking issues such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and class. Given our various disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, sociology, law, gender studies, religious studies), social positions and upbringings (in terms of race, ethnicity, religion-secularity, sexuality, national/regional backgrounds), and life experiences, we learned a great deal about the different ways in which we all connected and responded to Wekker’s writing. The interview questions were prepared collectively. Throughout the text version of the interview, individual interviewers are named when relevant for understanding the conversation. The article is an edited and translated version of the original, oral interview conducted in Dutch.

## Politics and Society

**The publication of *White Innocence* was met with controversy and sparked heated debates with harsh voices both in support of and criticising your argument. How do you reflect on these past months of what is now dubbed “the racism debate”, and the reception of *White Innocence*?**

**Wekker:** In *Witte Onschuld* (Dutch translation of *White Innocence*), which comes out on Monday 6 November 2017, I wrote a new chapter about the reception of *White Innocence* in the Netherlands and the US. What strikes me is that in the US the discourse to talk about race and ethnicity is much more available and widespread. So, one of the characteristics of the reception in the Netherlands is that people seem to be very incapable of talking about difference, especially when it concerns difference of race and/or ethnicity. This was also one of the conclusions of the research we did as the diversity committee at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The UvA can be understood as a microcosm of the Netherlands. On the one hand, the University has a remarkably positive self-image: look at us, we are great, everyone can enter, we're so diverse! At the same time there is a complete and utter aphasia when it concerns talking about race and/or ethnicity. When you invite representatives of the UvA to talk about diversity, they can speak about gender, and they can speak about internationalisation, but there is an astonishing silence about race and ethnicity. And you can see all of that reflected in the reception of *White Innocence*.

However, a distinction should be made between traditional media, social media, and regular everyday encounters I have with people. People whom I just happen to meet in the supermarket or on public transport often thank me for the work that I've done. Those who approach me out of the blue, often but not exclusively people of colour, both young and old, are very happy. I also noticed that young people often appreciate that I propose a discourse to talk about race and ethnicity. And then there's social media. I don't actually follow

everything, mostly because of the bitterness that seems to dominate there. I noticed there's a lot of youth who embrace my work. At the same time I received a lot of hate mail. There are those who want to sue me on account of hate speech against "Dutch people". So I guess what happens on social media is very mixed.

Finally, traditional media is dominated primarily by older white men, but also by white women, and people of colour are present to a far lesser extent. The tone that is set by the traditional media is negative. I get the impression that many journalists have never even read my book. People don't talk about my argumentation, and almost never about the actual content of the book. The conversation focuses mostly on the way I look, what my hairstyle is like, and which clothes I wear. The discussion is of a remarkably low standard. The fact that there is no engagement really troubled me. There's the sense that everything I discuss is merely my own problem, and the problem of people of colour, but not the problem of white journalists. Many feel incredibly attacked by my use of the term "white", as well as the term "innocence". The title of my book, *White Innocence*, is thus met with a lot of resistance. Of course, we can say a lot about this resistance. Taking into account the longer history, from the moment that Philomena Essed (1984) began to publish about everyday racism and was met with an avalanche of criticism, the sole possible conclusion is that we didn't get anywhere and that nothing has changed. We are still in the same state of denying race and racism as a fundamental signifier in Dutch society. So when it concerns a majority of white people, I see hardly any development since then. Yet, I should make one exception: my work does have an impact on young white people, but hardly or not at all on older white people.

More promising is the fact that a second anti-racist wave is taking place at the moment. A huge group of youth of colour, but also white youth, has started to unite in a second anti-racist wave. The former group of young people really wish to claim their

citizenship in the Netherlands. They don't want to follow what people of colour of my generation said: "we're guests here, so let's take it a down a notch".

So that's my idea about the reception of *White Innocence*. It seems crucial to continue this type of work. For sure, I am positive about the anti-racist movement—I think that it's incredible. And you know, also about the possibilities of social media. In the first antiracist wave, in which I participated, we didn't have social media. So we were heavily dependent on traditional media. With current social media, people can set their own agendas, make plans, and maintain contact with each other. That is exceptionally positive.

**Do you notice any transformation in the construction of white innocence throughout the debate, or in different times and places? Is there some form of "essence" to white innocence, or are its characteristics changing? For example, did the content and direction of white innocence change in light of the rise of right-wing populism in European contexts? And is white innocence transforming, for example, in the debate about Black Pete<sup>2</sup>?**

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<sup>2</sup> Black Pete is the black-faced jolly servant of Sinterklaas, a Santa Claus type figure, who visits the Netherlands and Belgium each year in December to give presents to children. This figure of Black Pete has been the pivotal symbol of recent anti-racist activism and public debates about racism in the Netherlands. Anti-Black Pete activists call for the dismissal of or a change to this tradition, claiming that Black Pete is a racist portrayal and a resonance of slavery. Proponents of the Black Pete tradition argue that it is part of Dutch culture and should not be changed. The heavily polarised discussion has been taking place across Dutch media and in politics. Although taking off a couple of years later, the discussion now takes place in Flemish public debates as well, albeit to a lesser extent.

**Wekker:** Well that's the whole issue. I am a cultural anthropologist so I tend to focus on the outcome of a trajectory of developments in the Netherlands. And I elaborate on the ways in which the "cultural archive" (2016, pp. 19-20), which was formed during the colonial era, continues to be apparent. Yet I believe that it is rather pressing that historians investigate what the cultural archive looks like in different time periods. During my life, I have noticed how much the ways in which the cultural archive, specifically in relation to the way race is expressed, can change across different time periods. I wrote in *White Innocence* how I, as a little girl, belonged to a Surinamese family that had just arrived in the Netherlands during the 1950s. All of us made a trip to Artis, the zoo in Amsterdam. I was two years old at the time. The picture that was eventually included in *White Innocence* (2016, p. 9) was taken on that day. You can see these post-war white women staring at us in the margins of the picture. So we were focusing on the donkey, and they were preoccupied with us. We were one of the first families from Suriname who came to live in the Netherlands and curiosity was all around. Many people wanted to touch us, to see if we were "real", and to feel our hair. This was linked to a feeling of being "the first" and created the sense that we were rather exceptional. It wasn't connected to a feeling of threat; there were so few people of colour in the Netherlands at the time. It was the time of reconstruction [after World War II] and everyone was asked to work together and do their part, and there was quite some employment opportunity.

This differs a lot from the period in the Netherlands that follows right after, which I discuss with the incidents with politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Minister [of Integration] Rita Verdonk threatened to withdraw Hirsi Ali's Dutch citizenship, which would mean that she would also lose her seat in parliament. Eventually, Hirsi Ali took the initiative to leave herself. So we see the difference in the rudeness with which Hirsi Ali was confronted. This is also the time that witnessed the arrival of the "new realist discourse" (Prins, 2002), which is indeed connected to right-wing populism in the Netherlands. This new realist discourse argues

that we shouldn't beat around the bush anymore, but instead speak our minds and say that "those foreigners" should assimilate and integrate. Nowadays, in this realist discourse, assimilation has become the complete responsibility of so-called newcomers. Earlier, in the 1980s, when I had my first job and worked at the Ministry of Wealth, Healthcare, and Culture, this was more of a two-way process. Since then, the responsibility has shifted in a most preposterous way. This shift in who is responsible for "integration" means that everyone who enters the Netherlands for the first time is asked to seek for themselves where they will take their [obligatory] language course. The same ridiculousness is contained within the first interviews that, for example, gay asylum-seekers have to undergo with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Migrants are expected to declare in these very first meetings "I am gay and that's why I ran". If you don't, there's no way, and you can forget about getting through the system. This narrow-mindedness has taken ground in an extremely disturbing fashion.

So, is there an essence to *White Innocence*? No, it depends on the context; how the cultural archive expresses itself. It is crucial that more research is done about different periods in history to see how this becomes apparent. There are several historians who have proposed to do this. You see, the issue is that we never critically examined the cultural archive in the Netherlands. We've conveniently imagined that this archive merely contains positive features. For example, that we are traditionally exceptionally welcoming toward newcomers, so-to-speak, and that everyone can come in and flourish here. This rose-coloured self-image emerges in many different areas. It is also applicable to gender and sexuality. We even feel that we have a lot to teach the rest of the world about gender and sexual regimes, that others should truly take us as an example. The self-image is imbricated in the ways in which [the Ministry of] Foreign Affairs collaborates with all kinds of NGOs and human rights organisations. In this regard, it is surprising how little we have to say about how race

functions on a global scale. On the contrary, we're internationally chastised by others about the prevailing everyday racism in the Netherlands. I can already imagine Prime Minister Mark Rutte saying: "What do they know about this? They don't know anything, they don't know the Netherlands". I'm very happy that I cannot be accused of such a claim—if this were the case we would hear it all around.

This tells us something: our activities and self-image mirror our engagement with gender and sexuality on the one hand, and race on the other. The fact that we never deemed it worthwhile to rigorously investigate the cultural archive: what is in there? Under what conditions does it express itself, in what way? A lack of material is definitely not the problem. I found that one of the hardest questions while I was writing the book was "what will be the limits of my material"? I aimed to show how the cultural archive works in different domains. With this approach, I wanted to show how race is heavily implanted in this cultural archive for it to come out so brightly and clearly to this day and age. It was very difficult to choose. In the end I put forward a kind of template that you can use and implement. But I also believe that different disciplines should do the work within their own field of study, and should examine how the cultural archive works in that particular area.

**This question takes into consideration the tension between strategic essentialism and intersectionality. It may be necessary at times to essentialise an identity in order for marginalised groups to gain political and societal credibility, to be able to mobilise social movements and to put repression of and discrimination against minorities on the agenda. At the same time, it is crucial to think and express inclusivity and to safeguard diversity within critical movements. Both academics and activists encounter this dilemma. What is your perspective in this regard?**

**Mustafa (interviewer):** This is something that I often experience myself. It can be strategic to emphasise a certain element of my identity, but then there can also be a conflict between my various identities. I am a black Muslim woman, and both of these identities are the centre of attention in the racism debate. I'm always in a kind of split, a space in-between. This can be productive, as this grants me the space to reflect. Whenever I'm only with black activists, blackness is the only matter of concern, and islamophobia tends to be excluded from the agenda as a form of racism. And this goes the other way around as well. When I'm with groups who want to counter islamophobia, and which consist mainly of Moroccan Dutch or Turkish Dutch people, blackness is not a topic in the conversation. As a phenomenon, black Muslims seem to be non-existent. This situation motivates me to think more about this essentialism: what are the boundaries and when do they manifest? How can we deal with this?

**Wekker:** Yes, I recognise this, and it's something to be very aware of. I sometimes get the impression that men are very dominant and active in the black activist movements. This is different from the first antiracist wave, which was rooted in women's activism, and in which women made the analyses. Therefore, I am working to encourage young black, migrant and refugee women to take on key positions and to speak out, and not to let the antiracist movement be dominated by men. [It is] a movement that is also often inflicted by internal homophobia. So how would I regard this? I don't consider identity to be an established fact, but a kind of role that you play, or stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. This means that identity is in constant movement and that certain elements may become important and singled out in different moments. Yet I always try to shed light on the complexity of these stories, and to resist being reduced to one axis of significance, because our stories are more complex than only being black. It has to do with intersectionality at all times. This is a very burdensome role to play: to emphasise that the often unspoken principle on which we base ourselves is too limited; that we should not only look at black people, but also at the workings

of gender. And what does sexuality have to do with it? How about class? This is second nature to me, I do it automatically. I don't really recognise myself as belonging one hundred percent to any group at all. I insist on keeping all of these elements of myself and on not being forced to flatness in my stories or in the way I experience myself. So I think that you will have a similar task in life as a black Muslima, to always bring this to the story, more axes of difference. Then, is it sometimes necessary to be strategically essentialist? I am not convinced that we will do ourselves any favour that way. I would prefer to complicate strategic essentialism from the outset; that we make clear from the very first start that identity consists of multiplicity.

**Mustafa (interviewer):** This challenges me, so I will continue this line of questioning. What would this look like in practice? I agree with you that we need to problematise and complicate strategic essentialism head on, but at some point you do have to make choices in practice and in activism. I also have a refugee background, so all those identities are always there. But sometimes they tell you, literally, "no, you just have to choose from those identities. We're faced with a bigger challenge: we need to dismantle whiteness. That's our shared goal. So are you black, or are you a Muslim? You shouldn't talk about all those other identities, nor about sexuality. You should focus on blackness or Muslimness". So my question would be, is intersectionality only important on the outside, in the search of alliances with other movements, or is intersectionality also an internal issue?

**Wekker:** Yes. I wouldn't even know how to imagine choosing between being a refugee, or being black, or being a Muslima. I sense that intersectionality is often misunderstood, especially by men, who think that they can just read one article about it and get the hang of it. Even more so, they then have become experts in the area! I can't relate at all to the idea that we have to make a choice between these identities, because we need to collectively dismantle whiteness, for example. You see, it's the same story that was told during the decolonial wars:

women should just be quiet for now. Now that it supposedly concerns all of us, women's rights can be put in the background for a bit. But this doesn't come out of nowhere; you shouldn't shoot yourself in the foot by imagining the movement flatter than it is. I believe activists owe it to themselves to make more complex analyses of reality than repeating this dominant thinking: something is either gender, or it has to do with race and/or ethnicity, or with sexuality, or with religion, but not with all at once. That just doesn't work for me.

**This question aims to analyse the usefulness of using political-analytical concepts transatlantically or transnationally. How does the American-British context connect to local terminology about racism, discrimination, and change? Which concepts are particular for the Dutch-speaking context and might help us? How, if at all, can we develop a specific discourse to address racism in a way that it is heard and read by a broader audience?**

**Wekker:** Well, first of all we should take into account the longer history. James Baldwin says this all the time: he calls the US “the children of the Netherlands”. Race and racism were introduced by Europeans in America. And now we see that the discussion returns from the US. So of course we're a part of this debate. I do think it's crucial to develop specific terminology, and black, migrant, and refugee women have been doing this since the 1970s. This term “black, migrant, and refugee” (*zwart, migrant, en vluchteling* (ZMV) was coined by black women in the Netherlands and by women who had a migrant and refugee background (Botman, Jouwe & Wekker, 2001). This term is located in the Netherlands; it's about the different groups here and about ways you could name those. The concepts are political, we didn't take this from the US context. But I don't want to be the one to say which terminology is good or not. However, I can often immediately feel whether a term makes sense or not, if it's inclusive or offensive and exclusive. I still consider ZMV to be a very suitable term, but I'm open to having a debate if there are people who propose a different terminology.

We should not say that racism is mainly an American problem. That is such an easy presumption to hide behind, as if we can't learn anything from the US. I find that too shortsighted. Of course there are major differences between the US, the Netherlands, and Belgium. I do believe that we have not done enough in the Netherlands to acknowledge the ZMV people who have played an important role in the past. I wouldn't want to put Stokely Carmichael<sup>3</sup> on the table as an example, if that means we're forgetting about black thinkers who were important in the Netherlands. There are both men and women whom we should rescue from oblivion. I don't believe that we're copying the US, but we can be inspired by the US, as they can be inspired by us as well. We aren't just the little brother or sister, and the contexts are indeed different. Yet the project of developing a language, an inclusive, non-offensive language, to talk about race and/or ethnicity matters to all of us. It's truly embarrassing that we're not able to talk about this, that we suffer from a kind of aphasia.

You see, I noticed that many people want me to write down a kind of to-do list. The idea is that once we'll have completed all these points, we'll be all right and a solution will be there. I don't want to be forced into this role of "internal or national therapist". Thinking about these issues should be the responsibility of all of us. We shouldn't want to "resolve" certain issues too hastily by taking a pragmatic approach, as this would imply that we don't take the time to truly understand the problem.

## Academic Perspectives: Methodology and Disciplines of Debate

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<sup>3</sup> Stokely Carmichael, originally from Trinidad, was a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement in the US. He was active in the Black Power movement, first as leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, then as the "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Black Panther Party, and finally as a leader of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party.

***White Innocence* is researched and written in an uncommon style that combines analyses with personal anecdotes. This writing style raises questions: what are the challenges in presenting a creative methodology for a broad and/or interdisciplinary audience? And to what extent can this combination of theory and the personal in itself be considered an intervention in academia?**

**Wekker:** Yes, I do think that the mix of theory and personal matters is a critical intervention, but not everyone has the space and means to write this way. I would not advise young scholars at the beginning of their academic careers to challenge all sacred cows the way I have. If you want to make it in academia, you first have to prove you can write a thesis in the traditional way. Later on, you can figure out how to take space to experiment with the format. I have always found that very enjoyable and exciting. And it shouldn't be forbidden for academic books to be so exciting that you just can't wait to turn to the next page. The books that I find exciting don't necessarily represent the positivistic way of working, where the "I" is completely banned, and where it supposedly doesn't matter who the person or the researcher is. I have turned my back on these positivistic demands of neutrality and objectivity.

I have to say I quite underestimated the responses to my writing style. While I was writing, I assumed that everyone could follow me on this journey. I embrace an epistemological starting point that aligns with the perspective of Sandra Harding (1995). So this is not objectivity as in positivism, but a "strong objectivity", in which we all make clear from which position we speak—a positionality that enables us to understand a certain part of reality. Knowledge is produced at the intersections of our positionalities, and allows us to see that part of reality. And someone else, with another position, sees a different part of that reality. You can put these types of knowledge next to each other and at a certain point you will, hopefully, have a more complete understanding of reality. I didn't write a lot about this

in *White Innocence*. I do in the additional chapter in the Dutch translation *Witte Onschuld* because I noticed that many people assume that I wrote a non-academic book, which is quite a pity and at the same time noteworthy, really, that there is such a limited understanding of what academic work entails.

Is this an intervention, a critical intervention? I think so, yes. See, the fact that I look at Dutch society as an anthropologist is already a critical intervention. We're taught to think that as a sociologist, you analyse Dutch society, and as an anthropologist you analyse far-away countries, but I use methods from cultural anthropology to look at Dutch society. That in itself is an intervention that can be shocking for some people. And then the way of writing: people who are empirically trained and want to be able to count and read statistics won't feel at home with me either. I do consider the cultural archive a kind of "grand theory", and I try to find examples in different domains of how this plays out. And to that I add experiences of other people, and of myself, and analyse these. So, I analyse various things. I analyse practices, feelings, and organising principles, and what holds all of those together. These are methodological principles as used in anthropology and cultural studies. And postcoloniality or decoloniality, and intersectionality keep everything together. I think postcoloniality in the Netherlands has little colour on its cheeks, it's just so weak. Apparently it is entirely possible to call yourself a postcolonial thinker without ever speaking of race or ethnicity. That is inconceivable to me. One moment you study Shakespeare, and the next Arundhati Roy and suddenly you become "postcolonial". I'm not impressed by this.

So I see *White Innocence* as an intervention in established Dutch academic practices in many different ways. And it might be shocking indeed to read this book. My aim for this book was to participate in a debate, an international debate, about ways to study postcolonial societies such as the Netherlands. I embarked on this task with the help of decoloniality and intersectionality. I would like to see more research in other European countries about the

question: what does white innocence look like in Belgium, in Scandinavia, or in southern European countries? I hope that there will be more comparative intra-European perspectives on white innocence. I consider that to be of great significance. What kept me going was influenced by what happened to Philomena Essed, how she was cut to bits when she published her research about everyday racism. She eventually moved to the United States. And I decided: that's not going to happen to me! I don't want to write in the Dutch language and leave the book to Dutch critics only. I wanted to be a part of an international debate.

**Schrijvers (interviewer):** Do you think it is important for academic work to be accessible for people without such academic training?

**Wekker:** Definitely. We should be more consistent in this matter and emphasise its importance. We're paid by tax money, so we should write things that are accessible for those who pay for it, whether they have or haven't enjoyed an academic education. Hence, I tried to, and I try to do so in all my writing. I don't really recognise the boundaries between academic and non-academic genres, which is one of the characteristics of my work. By the way, I am planning to write two more books.

Anthropologist Ineke van Wetering did research in the Bijlmer<sup>4</sup> from 1975 until the early 1980s. During this period, many Surinamese came to the Netherlands from Suriname. She lived in one of the high-rise buildings and became a member of all kinds of women's groups. She wondered: what happens to all these people, especially the women? How do they maintain their culture? She also joined cultural associations. Van Wetering passed away before she was able to write a book. Her widower asked me whether I could write this book posthumously, so I am currently in the possession of stacks of handwritten fieldwork notes.

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<sup>4</sup> The "Bijlmer", or Bijlmermeer, is a neighbourhood in the southeast part of Amsterdam that was designed as a single high-rise project in the late 1960s. It is known for being inhabited since the 1970s by many people of Surinamese-Dutch and African backgrounds.

This will be my next book. Yes, it's an incredibly daunting task, and I am very eager to find out exactly how I will handle all of this. I don't know yet. I have to jump into this, and I am very curious about which epistemology I will apply here. I can't just pretend to be absent from this book, right? Will it be a book with two voices? Will Ineke and I get into a discussion? Because I will probably disagree with her every now and then. So it is a real challenge for me and I'm looking forward to start thinking about this next project.

The project following this one will be a novel. It will be about my grandmother—one of my grandmothers—but perhaps it will turn out to be about more grandmothers. That's a whole different way of writing. And I'm not saying that academics should not read that [type of writing] anymore, that a novel is only for "ordinary" people. I don't actually believe in such a distinction. My desire is to reach as big an audience as possible with everything that I write. I am aware that there are certain conventions, but I believe these conventions should be critically examined. I ask myself which conventions I wish to comply with or do without. But to emphasise once more, it's important to realise that I am emerita, so I can basically do whatever I like.

**With this question we would like to elaborate on the concept of race. Race is described as a social construct in *White Innocence* but seems to be used differently throughout the book. Is the concept mainly concerned with the relationship between black and white? How is race connected to other analytical concepts in the critical study of gender and sexuality, such as ethnicity and religion?**

**Wekker:** Well, black and white are political terms. These are terms that were coined by ZMV-women at a particular time of struggle within Dutch society. This is very important and is often not acknowledged. The role of women in developing the thinking about gender and ethnicity and/or race has been a lot more influential than that of men. In the 1970s, women

with different backgrounds came together to make a joint analysis of our situation. Men didn't do this. So that was per definition a very meaningful development. The Dutch government subsidised different groups, which were not encouraged to get together. Yet Turkish, Moroccan, Indo, Moluccan, Surinamese, and Antillean women sat down and came up with the term ZMV.

I believe that Islamic women, or Muslims in general, are nowadays regarded as the “ultimate other”. I would like to have had more opportunities to talk about this in *White Innocence*, but at the same time I consider this to be a different issue. It is urgent that another study focuses on what our cultural archive tells us about Muslims. This may even have a longer history than what the cultural archive tells us about black people. I suspect that the archive concerning Muslims is older, that there are similarities with the archive concerning black people, but that there are differences as well. However, I'm not quite sure what these differences are exactly. At this moment in time I can conclude that we have rather fixed ideas about who is and isn't emancipated when sexuality is the topic of debate. These ideas are structured in a kind of teleology: white women are at the summit of sexual emancipation, black women are too sexually free and Islamic women are not free enough. Those ideas are stuck in our heads nowadays. But I also know with respect to Muslim women that the framing was different at the end of the nineteenth century. Back then, they were considered the pinnacle of eroticism and desirability by white men. You see, there is still a lot of research to be done. I wish I had more insight in this area, but I don't. Someone else will have to do this work.

Can you speak of people who are not literally black, as “black”? You can, if you use black as a political term, in which case black refers to otherness. The assumption is that outward, phenotypic difference is somehow connected to all kinds of internal characteristics. Culture is then framed as something unchangeable, as if people are stuck in it. In this way,

culture becomes an almost biological explanation of difference. I have the sense that the static way Muslims are looked upon legitimises referring to Muslims as a race and/or an ethnicity on a conceptual level. I follow Stuart Hall (2000) here, who argues that race and ethnicity are two sides of the same coin. While race by and large emphasises the biological side, and ethnicity the so-called cultural side, both have become rather interchangeable and stringent nowadays in the sense that both are suffused with biological meaning.

Additionally, perceptions of adopted children of colour interest me. I did a research project on this with a few colleagues some years ago (Wekker et al., 2007). When the children of colour are still young and seen together with their white mothers, they are expected to be adopted. When the children grow up, this perception changes. A white man with his Thai-looking daughter is seen differently; the daughter is sexualised. We find it difficult to take into account that family members may have different phenotypes. Because of this, we often assume some form of sexual relationship. But what these different assumptions share, whether the children are young or already grown up, is that agency belongs to white people. A person of colour is always dependent on what meaning is ascribed to them by that white person. And it doesn't even seem to matter whether it is a Colombian or Thai person, all are "other" and dependent.

I think that race refers to the moments when circulating hierarchised ideas are projected onto people who are not white. What I wanted to ask you is, how do you exactly see this different use of race throughout my book?

**van den Brandt (interviewer):** If race is a social construct, then you have a very broad definition that allows a lot, and can be employed in various ways. We can take the chapters "The House that Race Built" and "Of Homonostalgia and (Post)Coloniality" as examples. The first chapter asks the question how and where black women are studied: where are they taken seriously as an interesting group to research and to learn from? I think that in this instance,

race refers to a particular group of black women. The second chapter looks at “gay politics” and how that is connected to race. I think this is a methodological question. Race moves different ways conceptually. How do you see this? What are the boundaries? When can or can't it move?

**Wekker:** Ah, yes, I understand. In the first chapter you mention, I don't actually ask the question where black women are studied. What I ask is: what principles shape the governmental support or the academic study of women? And how does race play a role in that? And then I discuss that there are three different places in academia where women are studied. There seems to be one place where white women are studied, a second place is for ZMV-women, and the third place is for women from third world countries. This separation is not a coincidence, as we see the same thing happening in the ministries. And I analyse that race is an organising principle there. The point I wanted to raise here is that race is so embedded and cemented in our cultural archive, that it becomes an unconscious organising principle. Race is an unconscious ingredient that shapes our policies and knowledge production.

I can imagine that race is indeed employed in different ways in *White Innocence*, but it always comes back to the argument that race is a social construct. That social construct can be an organising principle at times, and a feeling at other times. In the second chapter you mention, I ask the question: is there continuity in the ways sexuality was experienced in the colonies vis-à-vis black women, and the way Pim Fortuyn experienced his sexuality in relation to Muslims? Race becomes more of a factor that guides feelings and emotions in that exploration. So perhaps you are right that race is given different meanings. In any case, it is a very complicated concept that can be implemented in various ways in socio-political areas as well. But I like thinking about this issue. And maybe that is exactly my point: 400 years of

colonialism have made race, in its various incarnations, a central but unconscious tool in our thinking, feeling, and acting. Race is ubiquitous, but mostly not recognized or acknowledged.

**This question is related to the previous discussion about concepts and focuses on the (supposed) (dis)connections between fields of research. In the study of race, the study of religion often seems to disappear. At the same time one could argue that the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe, or religious studies more broadly, is rather hesitant when it comes to the concept of race. Feminist and queer theory are moreover not often considered together with postcolonial and critical race perspectives. How can we make these fields of research and debate more productive in their connection?**

**Schrijvers (interviewer):** Being a researcher in the Netherlands can make me feel fragmented at times. It feels like there are separate academic fields, like anthropology, or gender studies, or religious studies, that don't interact with one another. How can we work to overcome these distinctions?

**Wekker:** This again has to do with our previous discussion about strategic essentialism and the pressure to make a choice between different identities. We see the same demarcation in academic disciplines of course. These younger disciplines that we are talking about, like Gender Studies, Sexuality and Ethnicity Studies, are built around one key concept, and all the rest is preferably kept aside so as to understand this key concept more clearly. Still, you shoot yourself in the foot if you don't approach gender as always and already entrenched by race, sexuality, and class. I feel like we repeat the traditional way of thinking in pillars—a thinking that might be connected to having been a pillarised country.<sup>5</sup> We're so infused by that way of

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<sup>5</sup> Both the Netherlands and Belgium used to be pillarised societies divided into tightly integrated communities formed on the basis of religion or ideology. Politics, administration,

thinking that it has become a very difficult habit to break. I couldn't agree more with your statement that gender studies rarely touches upon religion, the study of sexuality, or race and/or ethnicity. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the other fields of study. So when you're in the study of sexuality, you'll often only study white gay men. You have to make a lot of effort to thematise women; it's similar with religion or class. This brings us back to the same diagnosis: the dominant frameworks demand us to choose. You can be involved with gender and not take into account anything that happens in adjacent fields, even though that is a real shortcoming. I would prefer a similar approach as in the US or Canada, where intersectionality is the default setting in many Gender Studies programs from the start. That is very different compared to an approach in which a course on gender only includes other axes of significance in week nine, because by then, you have already installed an incorrect non-intersectional perspective and that is very persistent. I tried to show this in chapter two, "The House that Race Built": what all these disciplines do and what they exclude, and what you're missing because of this.

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civil society, media, and social life were divided and organised in autonomous political-societal structures called pillars: the liberal, the socialist, the Protestant and the Catholic pillar (in Belgium, Protestant communities were/are a small religious minority and not an independent pillar). The government acted as intermediary between the different ideological and religious communities. These pillars emerged as a result of political mobilisation in the nineteenth century. While in the Netherlands, pillarisation collapsed at the end of the 1960s under the pressures of the sexual revolution, the student revolt and the rise to power of the post-World War II baby boomers, in Belgium pillarisation remained at least until the 1970s. In comparison with the Netherlands, social life in Flanders up to the present could be considered more structured by a "pillarised" civil society.

**Miri (interviewer):** Another location to consider is Belgium. There's a course in the new Flemish interuniversity and interdisciplinary Master in Gender and Diversity in which we start with intersectionality and white privilege. We consider this to be essential. I think this is an interesting development; it seems like a different way of doing gender studies. Why does it sometimes work this way in some places while it doesn't in others?

**Wekker:** Perhaps people can learn from each other too. This master programme in Flanders was founded much later than many study programmes elsewhere. It could be that this enabled them to see how this works, and what could be done differently from the very beginning.

**To close, we would like to reflect on the legacy of Gloria Wekker for upcoming generations of young researchers and activists.**

**Wekker:** This is a nice question, but it also makes me wonder. What is actually my legacy? I think that I, together with some colleagues, put intersectionality on the map in the Netherlands. Back then when I returned from the US and started to work in the gender studies department, I was shocked to see how little race and other axes of signification were a matter of concern. Yes, I truly did my best to make a difference, to put intersectionality as a concept on the agenda, and I should acknowledge that gender studies did change in those years, but all of that can be destroyed in an instant. What I find interesting is that you can see in my books how, when you do intersectionality, you're able to put gender and sexuality at the forefront one moment (as in my book *The Politics of Passion*) and put race and its intersections forward the next time, like I did in *White Innocence*. Intersectionality is such an enriching approach for precisely this reason. It enables you to work with this toolbox, depending on your interests, and emphasize something different each time. Meanwhile you should continue to ask questions about what else is going on there.

I think that part of my inheritance, part of my legacy, has to do with the history of black, migrant, and refugee women in the Netherlands. I always had the utmost difficulty getting funding and having my research subsidised, so it hasn't been all that easy. I was never able to get my research funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) because my research always in some way or another had to do with race. When the assumption is that "race is not an issue for us", why would you then fund this type of research? Therefore, I have only been able to write *White Innocence* after I retired from my position as a professor. It seems that things really started to take off then. *Scienceweb* dubbed me one of the ten most influential academics in the Netherlands in 2017. All sorts of accolades are coming my way. The University of Warwick (UK) has proposed to name an award for young PhD scholars who are doing post- and decolonial work after me. On December 11, I was awarded the prestigious governmental Joke Smit prize, for my endeavours to improve the position of ZMV women in society and for bringing the debate to more complicated levels. It is bittersweet, how all of this is happening only now that I have decided to take matters into my own hands. It says a lot about Dutch academia. That really saddens me, so I want this to be said as well.

Whether academia is then the right place to raise these concerns? Well, we need it there too. You cannot say, "let them do whatever they'd like". The battle has to be fought there as well. Of course it is not easy, but it should be done.

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