

**Uncomfortable Ethnographies:
The Politics of Race and the Untimeliness of Critique**
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Review of: Gloria Wekker (2016) *White Innocence*. Durham: Duke University Press, 240 pp.

In a recent article titled “The coercive character of our ‘normal’”, Sander van Walsum (2017) briefly refers to the controversy surrounding the Dutch politician and ex-VJ and media presenter, Sylvana Simons. Van Walsum tries to understand the sharp turnaround in the public profile of Simons, from popular media presenter to hated public voice against racism. To the extent that Simons remained *simply* a “coloured” face in media culture, she was popular. But hidden behind that popularity lay the problematic politics of tolerance which Wendy Brown’s (2006) book-length analysis has exposed. For Simons could be popular only to the extent that her race was a commodity and/or an irrelevant aspect of her identity, and not “an issue”. The moment she scathingly brought up the racist and colonial mentality in the Netherlands, the often revolting public attacks against her began. Van Walsum suggests Simons’ exposed the racist assumption that she existed precisely thanks to the public and so should conform to its expectations - that is, shut up about race, and racism, since the Netherlands was not racist. After all, how could she have been so popular if it had been so?

The Simons controversy exposes something particular, and peculiar, within Dutch society. On the one hand, the claim that Dutch society is extraordinarily liberal, open-minded, and yes, that word again, tolerant. On the other, the dramatic rise in racist and xenophobic political populism since the late 1990s. Gloria Wekker confronts this paradox, and its attendant historical precedents, in her politico-economic and cultural genealogy of contemporary Dutch society. As an activist and public intellectual, Wekker’s longstanding involvement in issues around gender, race and sexuality are crystallized in a clearly constructed and lucidly developed series of arguments which in book form confront this paradox head on. This paradox is addressed by Wekker by framing herself as an anthropologist with the goal of “making the familiar world strange” (ix). Wekker’s goal of making the commonplace consensus strange seems appropriate given the claims of incomprehension and denial by which accusations of racism are met.

In the Introduction, Wekker identifies the central object of her analysis, “the white Dutch sense of self”, an ethnographic analysis of which would reveal that “whiteness is not acknowledged as a racialized/ethnicized positioning at all” (2). In making this argument, Wekker connects to a longer intellectual study of whiteness, such as Richard Dyer’s *White* (1997), whose relative invisibility in studies of race and ethnicity kept whiteness as the norm rather than as a subject (and ethnicity) itself worthy of analysis. Specifically for the Dutch case, Wekker argues, whiteness is the effect of “an unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule” which structures “dominant meaning-making processes” including, one may presume, the vociferous denials of racism. She deploys Edward Said’s concept of the “cultural archive” (1993) as an analytical tool for understanding how the present Dutch climate around race relations is structured. The terms “imperial rule”, “cultural archive” and an ethnography of white Dutch selfhood are linked thus by Wekker: “a racial grammar, a deep structure of inequality in thought and affect based on race, was installed in nineteenth-century European imperial populations and ... it is from this deep reservoir, the cultural archive that ... a sense of self has been formed and fabricated” (2). And it is this self which she argues is marked by “white innocence”.

The recurrent appearance of the word “deep” should already suggest to the reader that Wekker’s analysis is based on a depth-hermeneutic that begins with and dives below the surface articulations of racial and ethnic discourse in the Netherlands. In revealing the present legacies of the hidden colonial archive, Wekker takes recourse to a primarily psychoanalytical language of “splitting” and “displacement” (4) to explain the processes by which the denial of European history manifests itself in the crises around racism today in Dutch society. This plumbing the depths of Dutch history and the cultural archive however, does not seek to find *one singular cause* for the prevalence of denial in the construction of white Dutch selfhood. Wekker immediately states that she attempts an “intersectional reading of the Dutch colonial archive, with special attention for the ways in which an imperial racial economy” is marked by “gendered, sexualized, and classed intersections” (2). Her intersectional analyses, spread out across the subsequent five chapters, focuses primarily on the western part of the Dutch empire, that is, Suriname and the Antilles. Each of these chapters fleshes out what Wekker identifies as three paradoxes which structure the white Dutch sense of self:

- a refusal to identify with migrants;
- the innocent victim of German Occupation;
- Dutch imperialism.

At first, a reader might find the stating of these elements confusing since they do not seem to name a paradox but perhaps historical “features” of Dutch selfhood. It is here, however, that the sometimes uncertain place of psychoanalysis is important to emphasize, since what Wekker is arguing is that in each of these elements, *a process of denial* is crucial. That is, (1) the historical reality of migration which structures *all* and not just non-white Dutch populations is denied; (2) the Dutch self-image as victim represses the memory of violence and collaboration in the Netherlands which marked the extermination of Jews under the Occupation; and (3) a denial of the crucial importance of Dutch imperialism in structuring forms of white superiority in the Dutch context.

These three denials, Wekker convincingly argues, enable a self-presentation of the white Dutch Self as “innocent”, the central concept through which Wekker develops her analyses in the chapters that follow. In other words, a process of denial helps the positing of a self-image of innocence – and innocence is of course a powerful mode of refusing accusations of racism. The paradoxes she identifies are fleshed out in three “innovations” in her methodology. Firstly, as already stated above, Wekker thinks of race, sexuality and gender together in an intersectional frame. Secondly, she links metropolitan and colonial history in her analyses; and lastly, she links the Eastern and Western spheres of Dutch imperialism. Each of these innovative perspectives are differentially evidenced in the five chapters which follow. The reader thus encounters different features of a complex theoretical and conceptual framework (three paradoxes and three perspectives) being deployed at different levels of intensity in each of the five controversies she constructs.

The first chapter analyzes “case studies of everyday racism” ranging from controversial statements on a Dutch TV talk show to literary analysis of Ellen Ombre’s *Negerjood*. Unlike the other chapters, which primarily though not exclusively fasten on a single object of analysis, this chapter captures in miniature, as it were, both the wide range of Wekker’s field of analyses as well as the conceptual resources she will deploy throughout the book. The importance of psychoanalysis is felt most strongly in this chapter with invocations of Fanon on the European unconscious, and processes of “internalization and splitting” (41). Further, the crucial link between racism, gender and sexuality are brought out through a reading of the submerged effects of the experience of slavery in the work of Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), the work of historian and sociologist Rudolf van Lier (*Samenleving in een Grensgebied*) and historians including Avtar Brah and Laura Ann Stoler.

The second chapter turns to important sites of knowledge-production blessed with the official sanction of being sciences, namely the University and governmental policy-making. The chapter swiftly shifts the focus from the sphere of popular culture (such as TV) to explore the enormous power that the nexus of racism and sexism exerts within government policy-making, the academy generally, and women/gender studies in particular. One of the most important insights Wekker

offers in her analysis of policy-making is the shift from “commensurate participation in society” and “integration, *while holding on to one’s own identity*” (55, emphasis added) to an increasing focus on “*shared values*” (55) and the necessity of integrating migrants into “Dutch society”. In other words, a broader focus on “employment, education, housing and political participation” (55) toward a more egalitarian society has been increasingly replaced by firstly the *identification* of “problem” groups (Turks, Moroccans, Antilleans) and their *integration* into Dutch society. Wekker’s own involvement in different government policy-making organs provides for compelling evidence that “long-standing ideas about and practices with regard to race” (58) structure the aims of policy, the allocation of funds, and the involvement (or not) of relevant, non-white partners in the process of policy-making. Her analyses reveal that the category “woman” is considered white, that “allochtonous women” do not fall within the ambit of “women” while the specific differences *between* allochtonous women are ignored. This colour-blindness regarding gender is then convincingly shown precisely in the area of women/gender studies, where once again the category “woman” does not include women of colour. In this chapter, Wekker’s intersectional focus on class, sexuality, race and gender clearly exposes the compartmentalized functioning of intellectual labour within the University, and policy-making generally.

The third chapter “The Coded language of the Hottentot Nymphae and the Discursive Presence of Race, 1917” fastens on an interesting if little-known case in the history of psychoanalysis in which three Dutch women were treated by the psychoanalyst Dr. J.H.W. van Ophuijsen. Here, the complex processes of identification and displacement become evident in the paradox Wekker identifies in which, while the white, upper-class women, believing they possessed overly developed labia minora, identified with “the supposed morphology of black women’s genitalia”, their doctor, on the other hand, dismissed their claims and persisted in diagnosing them as suffering from “a masculinity complex”. What propelled the doctor’s denial of these women’s racial imaginings, and why was it necessary, Wekker asks, for colonial ideologies of black women’s bodies and sexualities to be read through the lens of *masculinity*? In exploring this paradox fed by denial (the doctor’s) and displacement (the three women), Wekker deploys the

notion of the colonial archive, and the relation between the metropolis and the colony, to show how crucial sites of cultural dissemination, including advertisements, magazines and the World exhibitions, had provided a script through which these white women were exposed “to knowledge about black women and their bodies” (93). Further, Wekker shows how medical-scientific discourse furnished fantasies of the civilized male and the evolutionary higher-placed white race, thus relegating both women and people of colour to inferior positions in both scientific and popular discourse. Wekker convincingly shows how the black female body becomes the over-determined site through which an “explicit discourse on gender and sexuality...was informed by implicit assumptions about racial difference”(106).

It is in the chapter titled “Of Homo Nostalgia and (Post)Coloniality” that the strength of Wekker’s intersectional analysis comes most to the fore, as she moves between a genealogy of the women’s and gay rights movement, the contemporary defence of gay rights, and the disparaged figure of the un-integrated allochthon. The Dutch situation is particularly important here, since the alignment of Left and Right with specific political views gets undone in the wake of xenophobic gay rights and women’s rights discourses. While elsewhere, particularly the U.S., conservative social views issue from a combined homophobic and racist milieu, Wekker rightly argues that in the Dutch case seemingly feminist and gay rights’ discourses are closely aligned with malignant notions of cultural alterity and racial/ethnic/cultural inferiority. Hence the subtitle of the chapter ‘Or, Where did all the Critical White Gay Men go?’. Wekker rightly argues that women’s emancipation was understood in far more expansive terms including issues of education, employment, child care and sexual violence. The gay liberation movement, on the other hand, argues Wekker quoting existing research, was marked by “the depoliticized character of Dutch gay identity” (116) which was “anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Mepschen et al 2010, 971) and closely linked to normative notions of citizenship and exclusionary notions of nationalism.

Wekker fleshes out this normativity by exposing how a white European understanding of gay identity underwrote both the identification of sexuality of

people from other cultures as well as the demand for integration through the rhetoric of exposure in “coming out” discourse and speaking in public. Noting the virtual absence of “white and black, migrant and refugee lesbians” from the current political landscape, as well as the class-blindness of sexual rights discourse, she argues that “the assumption that speaking about one’s sexuality is only natural and thus good for everyone” (121) remains unquestioned. This equation between sexual acts and sexual identity which undergirds sexual rights discourse is singularly white, middle-class, European. Yet, precisely by claiming the status of former victims of homophobia, a nostalgic discourse of defensiveness against minorities is deployed by Dutch gay men.

In addition to an unexamined normativity, Wekker deploys Said’s concept of the cultural archive to situate the ambivalent relationship of desire and disgust which structures much public discourse of white Dutch gay men. The ethnic other (in this case, young men of Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds) is both desired and vilified. Wekker refers to a controversial interview with the late Pim Fortuyn, an openly gay man whose political campaigns targeted primarily those in the Netherlands having an Islamic background. Fortuyn’s stated desire for young Moroccans was matched by a dismissive stance toward their seemingly backward attitude – that is, denial of their homosexuality. Wekker insists that the raced and classed discourse of the white right to avail itself of the bodies of women and men in colonial history emerges precisely in this dialectic of desire and disgust. Thinking through gender, race and sexuality allows Wekker to situate the nostalgic gay rights discourse against minorities within a comparative perspective (with the women’s rights movements) and through an identification of the persistence of colonial modes of thought on coloured bodies and their sexualities. Her analysis punctures a developmental discourse of sexual and gender rights from an intersectional perspective, fleshing out in greater detail an earlier critique by Judith Butler (2008) of the link between history, time and sexuality.

The last full chapter of the book explores the increasingly virulent reactions in Dutch society to the critique of the figure of Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*), often identified as a Moorish servant to a white bishop, Sinterklaas. This cultural

tradition accompanied by much festivity is celebrated annually on December 5. *Zwarte Piet*’s integral place within *tradition*, particularly one enjoyed primarily by *children*, Wekker convincingly argues, helps explain the impassioned responses any anti-racist critique of this figure precipitates. Here the claim of “innocence” is most clearly seen since the figure of the innocent child enjoying a well-established Dutch tradition functions as a mechanism whereby the claim of racism can be denied. Wekker situates a series of controversies, including the cancellation of an artistic intervention around *Zwarte Piet* by two artists invited by the Van Abbe Museum in 2008, to then analyze the defensive (and aggressive) responses elicited primarily on the internet to critiques of the figure of *Zwarte Piet*. Deploying Paul Gilroy’s notion of “postcolonial melancholia”, Wekker frames the discourse that claims *Zwarte Piet* is part of “our” (Dutch) tradition as a melancholic response of sadness where something valuable from colonial history is threatened by the presence of the unwanted outsiders within. Coupled with the continual references to children, and thus a discourse of innocence, the structure of denial and then displacement (foreigners do not understand “our” tradition) generates an aggressively defensive discourse of an innocent white Dutch identity.

Wekker’s argument that whiteness exempts itself from charges of racism through claims of innocence is innovatively built up by moving her analytical gaze across a very disparate range of objects – from TV talk shows, psychoanalytical case study, popular controversies around tradition, literary analysis, and institutional critique. As a method, taking this very varied set of objects as scenes for analysis, often punctuated by tellingly painful and pungent personal anecdotes, makes for refreshing reading since no one disciplinary paradigm with its own privileged object domain prevails. Structuring this wide-ranging series of analyses through the triple-paradox framework helps the reader to situate her attention even as analytical objects shift rapidly. The use of psychoanalytic language (denial, repression, splitting, internalization, displacement) is iconoclastic, since Wekker’s engagement with psychoanalysis is primarily through its generative power evidenced in the work of writers such as Fanon and Césaire, rather than through explicit invocation of Freud and/or Lacan as “masters” of the discourse.

Wekker's book-length study of *White Innocence* is untimely. If timeliness means being appropriate, and exhibiting the norms of propriety, then *White Innocence* speaks to an interlocutor – the white Dutch self – who would find the book inappropriate, and confronting. And that is precisely the book's aim. One could argue that being untimely, in this sense, is precisely what critique means. Wekker's scholarly intervention in an increasingly fraught public debate around race exhibits precisely the right sort of untimeliness, that is, puncturing the complacent, consensual and self-deluding image of a small, liberal and innocent nation whose culture is far from racist.

White Innocence is untimely in another sense too. There might be a sense for some readers going through the book that "of course" would be the obvious response to an argument which claims that colonial history and deep structures of racism, misogyny and homophobia structure the white self – that is, a sense of "haven't we heard this all before?" But this is precisely where the book is untimely in a productive and critical way. For in the *Dutch* context, as Wekker clearly shows, it is precisely a *denial* of colonial history, with its attendant intellectual, affective and discursive consequences, that marks the contemporary multicultural scene of politics. The book then is not repeating an argument in an all-too familiar context. Rather, it is inserting a critical analysis into a national context which has strenuously denied any implication in the dark history of colonialism and racism. These two forms of untimeliness make Wekker's intervention particularly useful in a Dutch political climate unwilling to look critically at its own self-image, as well as for theorists of race beyond the Netherlands who seek to understand how racism manifests itself quite differently in different geo-political contexts.

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Biography

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