

Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016, 240 pp., ISBN 978 082 236 075 9).

When the political message of a leading political party in the midst of the 2017 Dutch national elections suggests ‘There is something wrong with our country’, we recognise that Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* touches on a sensitive current national conversation. Indeed, this is what the slim volume of five succinct chapters sets out to critically analyse, although not in the sense suggested by politicians. In this book, the Netherlands’ perception of itself as a ‘small nation, innocent, [...] inherently anti-racist [and without] bad intentions’ (166) – that is to say, what had come to be considered as ‘normal’ – is placed under critical inspection. *White Innocence* is certainly not alone in addressing this topic; it comes in the wake of numerous publications, including *Dutch Racism* (2014), an edited volume to which Wekker contributed (and where she introduces the analytical direction of this book) not to mention her own numerous publications that reach back to the early 1980s.

Although it could not be described as ‘history’, Wekker’s book, which coincides with her retirement, is certainly *about* history – *Nederlandse geschiedenis*. Her pointed challenge to former Dutch historian colleagues is that:

... compared to other colonial nations like France and Great Britain, it is remarkable that in the Dutch academy, historical research and general ways of knowing have been set up in such a way that the history of the metropole is structurally set apart from the history of the colonies. (25)

Repeating the observation with more emphasis later in the book, she asserts that unlike Netherlands-focussed North American academics (or those who have learned their trade their) who have ‘shown the way’, ‘[t]he majority of Dutch historians have persistently abstained from seeking colonial connections’ (84); and in one case, referred to twice, see no relevance in doing so. Thus, the crucial point about ‘white innocence’ is that ultimately it rests on willful, historical ignorance.

In the book’s complex theoretical positioning, it is its postcolonial perspective that is most readily and immediately apprehended. Wekker bases her analysis on an adaptation of Edward Said’s concept of the ‘cultural archive’ (elsewhere more figuratively referred to as ‘this submerged continent’ (39)). By this, she explains, drawing on the American scholar of Dutch colonialism, Ann Stoler, that she understands ‘a repository of memory’: ‘the memories, the knowledge, and affect with regard to race that were deposited within

metropolitan populations and the power relations embedded within them' (19). The problem with the archive – to extend the metaphor – is that in formulating a contemporary Dutch self-representation, the Netherlands' imperial past has been filed away rendering the nation blind to its imperial legacy. One is reminded in this context of Paul Bijl's recent history (*Emerging memory*, 2014) of one colonial-era photograph in which he employs the term 'cultural aphasia' to explain the remarkable 'invisibility' of such images (and accounts) of colonial atrocities. The postcolonial scholar of postcolonial 'Indo' history, Lissy van Leeuwen, succinctly summed up this same Dutch cultural characteristic of 'not seeing' as 'zwijgen, ontkennen, vergeten en de andere kant op kijken' (remaining silent, denying, forgetting, and looking the other way) in reference to the populist politician, Geert Wilders, in a 2009 *De Groene Amsterdamer* article, which Wekker cites. As Melissa Weiner has also recently argued in an article in *Sociology Compass* (2014), the roots of 'institutionalised everyday racism' in the Netherlands, lies in the suppressed anxieties inherited from the Netherlands' colonial past.

Wekker, however, goes further, insisting on the necessity of linking this broad reference to the Netherlands' 'post-imperial' condition to a second fundamental theoretical perspective, that of the 'intersectionality' of race and gender. This is her principled stance for 'looking at the world'. It holds that one needs to see 'gender as an important social and symbolical axis of difference [that is] simultaneously operative with others like race, class, sexuality and religion' (21). This perspective of intersectionality ensures that even the more familiar 'everyday' racial and gendered act implicates an extensive subterranean complex web of attitudes and assumptions that ultimately have links back to an imperial/colonial past. From this perspective Wekker specifically also challenges her former gender studies colleagues, whom she acknowledges, might otherwise have been her allies.

*White Innocence* presents five thought-provoking 'scenarios' plus a capstone coda spelling out the thesis presented in the Introduction to stage the interrelatedness (intersectionality) of the elements that represent what she proposes is the essential DNA of contemporary Dutch culture. Each addresses a different but related aspect and draws on her own personal experiences as well as easily recognisable (for Dutch readers) examples of 'everyday life' to develop a passionate but often highly abstract analysis.

The discussion opens with apparently straight forward 'Case studies of everyday racism' in contemporary Netherlands. She inserts her own experience here as part of a triptych of scenarios in which the black woman is the object of negative Dutch public scrutiny. Here she focuses 'on the ways black people, but especially black women, were and are envisioned in the Dutch cultural archive' (31). Whether this has parallels with the experience of black women in the US? Well, yes, but 'there is also a specificity to Dutch racism' derived from a colonial past. This leads to 'a situation in which subjects and objects of racism keep each other in a delicate balance and where, until recently, the same evasive discursive

repertoires with regard to race were shared' (38-39). The us parallel, she states, has yet to be studied, but suggests it parallels what the African-American historian and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois defined long ago in his *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) as a 'double consciousness' (38).

In Chapter Two, in which Wekker deals with the core question of the interrelatedness of race and gender, she takes aim at government and academic departments that have corroborated in 'the silent work that race does in the public sphere' (52). Here, in a necessarily summary overview of institutional practice since the 1980s, Wekker 'names and shames' government practices, and again, alongside her analytical tools, employs her own experiences as points of departure. From a critique of those government departments centrally concerned with race/ethnicity issues – whose name changes since the 1980s provide an effective signpost to the changing political discourse and its policy implications – the discussion moves on to the 'battle ground' of academic gender studies. Rather than seeing their work as positive, Wekker argues that in fact here the 'fear and avoidance of the axis of race/ethnicity are dominant' (52). As a parting message to the academic world, her hope is that the book 'offer[s] tools to break through the impasse that we are stuck in with regard to race in women's studies and beyond' (52), although undoubtedly this will be (and already has) met with controversy.

Chapter Three is the book's only detailed focus on an historical moment of colonialism/imperialism. It concerns the racial construction of science, in this case how colonial racism came to permeate the development of psychoanalysis. This moves the discussion from the sociological to the psychological dimension, and provides an insight into the question of how 'the concepts of self and other [in particular as this applies to gendered subjectivities] that came into being in Western modernity were dependent on the politics of colonial relations' (106). That being the case, it points to the necessity of 'a postcolonial approach to the study of subjectivity'.

Chapter Four ('Of homo nostalgia and (post) coloniality') addresses the contemporary political scene to begin to unravel the apparent contradictoriness in the anti-Islam rhetoric in the campaign against homophobia articulated by the murdered politician, Pim Fortuyn – 'the first political murder in centuries' (126) – and subsequently by Geert Wilders. This can only be understood, she suggests, if one recognises how the desires and fears expressed in that discourse draw on deeply embedded colonial racist perspectives. The chapter provides another example of how Wekker employs her theory of 'intersectionality' which she posits as the only way to begin to untangle the multiple gender, colonial and racial structures that underpin the problem that a not-yet-postcolonial Netherlands faces. Seemingly paradoxically, the overwhelmingly white gay discourse has contributed to the amnesia concerning the colonial past since it 'in fact helps shape and reinforce the contours of "tolerant" and "liberal" Dutch national culture' (116) that lies at the heart of the pathology of white innocence/smug ignorance. For Wekker,

the anti-Islam rhetoric of this former politician ‘provides direct and, frankly, sickening insight into colonial masculinity, with sexual and power cards stacked entirely in favour of white men’ (130).

With this analysis of recent political debates, Wekker explicitly demonstrates the violence that is unleashed by the ‘paradoxes’ of colonialism and race’, to quote the book’s subtitle. No less violent in its affect, and certainly no less topical, is the subject of her last chapter. This deals with that most beloved of Dutch children traditions, that of *Sinterklaas* and his ‘black’ helper’, *Zwarte Piet*. Since at least 2012, when the *Zwarte Piet* tradition was condemned by the chair of the UN Human Rights Commission, (although as Wekker points out, it had been an issue since it was first raised in the 1960s), it has provided the fulcrum around which much of the popular debate on Dutch culture has revolved. Wekker’s incursion into this domain, if nothing else, has ensured that she/her book will inevitably continue to attract irate attention from a ‘traditionalist’ Dutch public incensed by the intervention of ‘foreign’ and ‘politically correct’ voices regarded as the ignorant enemies of Dutch culture. Wekker argues that this tradition, that calls out the ‘power mechanisms’ of the Netherlands’ past of slavery and colonialism, is no less violent in its impact on children than that of the Fortuyn/Wilders discourse on Dutch society at large in manufacturing a false Dutch self-representation.

While what Wekker brings to the table for review in *White Innocence* is not new, the volume is not an easy read. This is, in part, because of her insistence on mounting her case on a number of fronts simultaneously – the personal, the historical and the socio-cultural – and keeping all the balls in the air at once, as it were, while simultaneously subjecting them to examination from multiple theoretical vantage points. This is a consequence of a methodology that challenges most of the mainstream discourses with which academia is perhaps more familiar. In the end, it may be only those who appreciate the irony of the question that heads the coda – ‘What about the Captain?’ - who will be convinced by her argument.

And yet, through the very personal approach Wekker purposefully takes to the writing, and the choice of examples to illustrate her case - which, as she says several times, everyone knows, has seen, has experienced, or has read about - the book’s success lies precisely in attempting to make the familiar unfamiliar, to require the reader to question what they may have thought they knew. Claiming an intimate knowledge of the nooks and crannies of Dutch culture, despite being embedded in North American discourse – in positioning herself as an insider/outsider – makes it a controversial intervention in a country that has tended to keep its secrets buried within its own archive behind a protective wall of its own language. It behoves Dutch academe, in particular those who inhabit the domain of historiography, to respond to this very personal ‘insider’ challenge.