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Reading *White Innocence* across Disciplines in the Low Countries

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This special issue around *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) by Gloria Wekker grew out of an interdisciplinary conference hosted by the University of Liège in Belgium in 2021. The conference celebrated Wekker's work and was occasioned by some notable anniversaries in the university's history. In 2017, the University of Liège celebrated its bicentenary, a historical moment also for Dutch Studies as an academic discipline, for it was in Liège, in French-speaking Wallonia, that a chair for Dutch Literature and Eloquence was established in 1817, the very first outside the Dutch language area. The chair was created in the context of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, the brief political union of present-day Belgium, the Netherlands and the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg from 1815 to 1830. On the instigation of King William I, who took a keen interest in educational matters, three universities were established in the southern parts of the realm: in Liège, in Ghent and in Louvain (its older university having been abolished during the Napoleonic era). The first professor to occupy the chair of Dutch Studies in Liège was Johannes Kinker, the famous philosopher, poet, critic and all-round man of letters. Following the Belgian Revolution in 1830, Kinker was forced to return to his native city of Amsterdam. In the aftermath of the revolution, the Faculty of the Humanities was closed for a few years, but when it reopened in 1837, Dutch Studies was still part of the academic curriculum, initially in a much reduced form.

The bicentenary of Dutch Studies at Liège was commemorated in various ways. A tangible memento was the publication of a monograph painting a detailed picture of the history of two hundred years of Dutch Studies in at times challenging circumstances.¹ Another was the foundation of the King Willem-Alexander Chair for Low Countries Studies with generous support from the Netherlands Embassy in Brussels, a venture that includes the invitation of an internationally renowned academic. The first Visiting Professor was J.T. (Joep) Leerssen (2017–2018), who brought a captivating series of lectures and talks on the region of Liège as a historical cultural crossroads, sharing a culturally vibrant hinterland with the Dutch city of Maastricht and the German cities of Aachen and Cologne.

From 2019 to 2021 (the usual one-year scheme was extended because of Covid), the Dutch Studies section welcomed Gloria Wekker, Professor Emeritus from Utrecht

University, in recognition of her contributions to the study of gender and diversity in the Netherlands. Once again, the academic community benefited from the international outlook and expertise of an academic eager to break down boundaries between cultures and disciplines. On 24 March 2021, a special online conference entitled 'Reading *White Innocence*: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race' was hosted by the Dutch Studies section of the Department of Modern Languages with the support of the university's research centres Liliith (Liège-Literature-Linguistics) and CEREP (Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherche en Etudes Postcoloniales).² Organized in collaboration with the Nederlandse Taalunie, the conference invited scholars from universities and cultural institutions across the Low Countries to respond to Wekker's ground-breaking publication *White Innocence* (2016). This book, which appeared a couple of years after she retired early to be able to devote more time to research and publishing, is the culmination of Wekker's lifelong professional engagement with issues of race and their intersection with gender and sexuality, migration, multiculturalism, knowledge production and decoloniality.³

Wekker, who migrated to the Netherlands from Suriname at the age of one, studied cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and went on to obtain a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In her dissertation *I Am Gold Money: The Construction of Selves, Gender and Sexualities in a Female, Working-Class, Afro-Surinamese Setting* (defended in 1992), she examines the sexual subjectivity of Creole working-class women in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. A Dutch edition was issued in 1994. In her 2006 publication, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, she extends her doctoral research by adopting a transcontinental perspective. This work was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize of the American Anthropological Association in 2007.

Wekker's return to the Netherlands in 2002, to become Chair for Gender and Ethnicity Studies at the University of Utrecht, transpired to be a seminal move, both for her own career and for Dutch academia. While her time in the United States had given her a critical distance that enabled her to perceive the overt and covert forms of racism in Dutch society with greater clarity, it also proved to be an academic watershed moment. Wekker was only the second woman of colour to be granted a professorship (hoogleraarschap) and would go on to support others in their attempts to shatter glass ceilings, whether in terms of gender or diversity, and both as the coordinator of the Master's programme Comparative Women's Studies in Culture and Politics and as director of GEM, the Centre for Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism in Higher Education (Gender, Etniciteit en Multiculturaliteit in het Hoger Onderwijs). Not undeservedly, in 2017 ScienceGuide named her as one of the ten most influential researchers in the Netherlands, by which time *White Innocence* was creating a serious stir, and not just in academia.

As is explicitly noted by several of the contributors to this special issue, Wekker's book broke new ground in Low Countries Studies. Although earlier publications had pointed to the self-proclaimed innocence and even wilful ignorance of white Dutch people,⁴ it was *White Innocence* in the wake of increased attention for race-related issues in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement that really engendered public debate. In her book Wekker takes issue with the contemporary self-image of the Dutch, who pride themselves on being liberal-minded and tolerant. An advocate of Sandra Harding's notion of 'strong objectivity', she draws on her private and professional experiences to

expose the erroneous presumption of colour-blindness, which is ‘a dominant way the Dutch think about themselves.’⁵ This prevailing attitude of ‘white innocence’ also taints the Dutch reception of their ‘cultural archive’, another key concept she explores in the book, and one she defines as ‘the unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule’.⁶ Crucially, the consequences of the country’s colonial past are still unfolding, not only for the migrants and descendants of colonized ancestors, but for *all* Dutch people, including whites.⁷ This is a point that has been repeatedly overlooked by critics in the Netherlands, much to Wekker’s regret. In an additional chapter in the Dutch edition, Wekker zooms in on the reception of the book in the Netherlands. Entitled ‘Het grote ongemak: De ontvangst van *White Innocence*’⁸ (The Great Discomfort: The Reception of *White Innocence*), it describes how a sizable group of people objected to Wekker’s discourse, which they interpreted as an unjustified exercise in putting whites in the pillory. Ironically, in their protestations these critics were illustrating the very point about the invisibility of white privilege that Wekker raises in her work.

In Igbo,⁹ it is said that *ekwuro ekwu melu onu, anuro onu mee nti*. A literal translation of this would be ‘(seeing and) not speaking is the fault of the lips; (seeing and) not hearing is the fault of the ears,’ meaning that those who are in the position to call others to order must speak, and those who hear this call must heed the warning. It is a reminder to the village elders of their duty in ensuring that the young do not go astray and to the young to listen to their elders. In *White Innocence*, Wekker is the elder shining a light on racism in the Netherlands and sounding the warning that there is a problem. In Belgium, too, the rhetoric around racism tends to be infuriatingly simplistic: if it is not blatant, if it is not articulated, it cannot be racism.

Throughout her work, Wekker insists that we see racism not as individual experiences of discrimination, but as a systemic problem. Racism need not be blatant, and often intersects with other modes of discrimination and oppression, but always produces the same polarizing result: the ‘other’ and the ‘norm’. The general (white) attitude – which even extends to well-meaning leftist people – is that we live in a post-colonial, post-racist world. Therefore, the hostile reception to *White Innocence* in some quarters in the Netherlands is unfortunate, but not unexpected, and anecdotal evidence suggests a similar book focusing on Belgium is not likely to fare differently. One only needs to see how long it has taken for the needle on the Black Pete issue to shift a little to understand this.¹⁰ Insufficient attention in education to the colonial past and its present-day legacy only helps to foster this self-image of a benevolent, tolerant society that is at odds with the experience of so many, including Wekker. Consequently, *White Innocence* presents a crucial call to remove that veil of blindness, to look beyond those self-congratulatory labels of ‘benevolence’ and ‘tolerance’.

This special issue opens with a conversation with Wekker herself, in which she revisits the observations she made in her keynote lecture. As in her book, she looks at her own experiences and career through an intersectional lens to show bias and white innocence at work. Although she speaks candidly about the unrecognized prevalence in Dutch society and the hurdles she encountered in the course of her own professional trajectory, she insists that her remarks are not to be perceived as a litany of complaints. As suggested also by the interview’s telling title, “‘How Does One Survive the University as a Space Invader?’: Beyond White Innocence in the Academy’, Wekker is sharing notes on her

own productive career in order to provide encouragement to those battling with (in)visible forms of racism in academic contexts. In the process, Wekker does not fail to offer concrete suggestions for positive action to counter academia's white innocence. Speaking fondly of the intellectuals who guided her own trajectory, she insists on the vital importance of role models and academic mentorship for students situated outside the mainstream. Those of us committed to decolonizing the academic curriculum she advises to develop, and pass on, a greater awareness of our disciplines' imperial origins and racialized premises. She does not hesitate to include her own discipline, the relatively young field of gender studies, and goes on to plead for a greater diversification of research in order to help combat racism and white innocence in academia and beyond.

The articles that follow the interview with Wekker, written by experts from a diverse range of fields, take her call for diversification and awareness to heart and demonstrate how her thinking resonates in their respective research projects in fields ranging from linguistics to literary studies, history and art history. They engage with various aspects of *White Innocence* and apply Wekker's insights to other areas of Dutch society but also to other contexts in the Low Countries and beyond.

Dominiek Dendooven and Agnes Andeweg respectively engage with the notion of the cultural archive in history and art history. Dendooven demonstrates the powerful workings of the cultural archive by applying the concept to his own field of study of the First World War. Although little known to the general public, also soldiers of colour fought in that war, alongside the white European soldiers found in the more iconic images of brave and later shell-shocked young men who were conscripted barely out of adolescence. In his article Dendooven demonstrates how the negative portrayal of black soldiers in wartime propaganda was heavily tainted by the colonial discourses of the European armies that deployed them. Savagery and infantilism dominated the discussions and images of soldiers who were conscripted from the colonies. It is only very recently, Dendooven shows, that this heavily racialized portrayal illustrating the process of ritualized degradation Wekker has also identified in *White Innocence*, is beginning to be addressed in commemorations and museum displays. In a very literal sense, the black soldier is finally being given a voice and allowed to speak to us from the past.

Building on Wekker's denunciation of the coloniality that underlies the Dutch 'cultural archive', Andeweg calls for a more historically-grounded approach to the concept. While she acknowledges Wekker's trailblazing efforts to expose dominant attitudes of white innocence regarding the reverberations of the colonial past into contemporary Dutch society, Andeweg insists that, in order to fuel change, a more profound understanding of how the past is brought into the present is required. In her case study of a painting by Rembrandt that is currently known as 'Two African men', Andeweg draws on the successive adjustments of the painting's nomenclature to argue that a more historical approach to the cultural archive can help to develop counter-discourses and alternative self-perceptions that challenge the sense of white innocence dominating Dutch society.

Literary scholar Bastien Bomans brings Wekker's ideas to bear on Queer Studies in a sociocultural context well beyond the Low Countries. His article opens with a critical reading of the variable exploitation of queer issues in contemporary Flemish nationalist discourses, which he uses as a springboard to a close reading of very recent representations of nonnormative genders and sexualities in North American literature and

television. His discussion shows how the novel *Brother* (2018) by Canadian author David Chariandy and the first and second seasons of the American television series *Pose* (2018, 2019), created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals, put into practice Wekker's rejection of the whitewashing and heteronormativity of 'imperialist nostalgia' in favour of a 'critical nostalgia' that adopts a politics of solidarity grounded in diversity and queerness. Bomans shows how, by integrating black and brown queer subjectivities into the 1980s and 1990s settings of their fictional works, Chariandy and the makers of *Pose* are reshaping the past with the aim of promoting a more inclusive future.

In his article 'How the Flemings Became White: Race, Language, and Colonialism in the Making of Flanders' specialist in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies Sibbo Kanobana argues that the depreciation of the Flemish and their language and culture in nineteenth-century Belgian society can be seen as a form of racialization comparable to the more widely discussed vilification of the Irish in Victorian Britain. He goes on to show how this historic depreciation of the Flemish led to their exclusion from Belgian politics, even when they belonged to the francophone elite. Flemings were eager to participate in the Belgian colonization of Central Africa, finding in their elevated colonial status, achieved by their own racialized depreciation of the colonized Congolese, a means to climb the social ladder also in their home country. Although historically the Flemish Movement was grounded in the struggle for the socioeconomic advancement and cultural acceptance of Flanders, Kanobana's discussion of the political dynamics in present-day Flanders demonstrates how the Flemish nationalist parties' insistence on Flemish independence has been bracketed together with racism against migrants of colour, whose racialized treatment bears similarities with the treatment the Flemish themselves once received.

The sociolinguistic study of Stefan Grondelaers and Paul van Gent on the value judgements attached to Moroccan-Dutch accents both confirms and contests Wekker's observations regarding racism in the Netherlands. Although migrant accents tend to be harshly judged, the authors' listening experiments reveal that stereotypical perceptions of Dutch speakers of Moroccan descent are only partially upheld in the case of Moroccan-Dutch men. In alignment with Wekker's interest in the intersection of gender and race, Grondelaers and Van Gent refine earlier studies on migrant accents in the Netherlands (including their own) by confronting their test subjects with both male and female Moroccan-Dutch accents, in order to test the intersectional invisibility hypothesis, which stipulates that social cognition about population groups is informed by beliefs concerning the group's male members alone. Their research demonstrated that the speech of Moroccan-Dutch women engendered less extreme negative reactions, even though it was perceived as further removed from indigenous speech and less dynamic than their male counterparts. Most surprisingly, their study showed that, in spite of the negative connotations evoked by the speech of Moroccan-Dutch men, their accent was also perceived as the most dynamically prestigious of all, more so than even indigenous accents. For Grondelaers and Van Gent, these findings testify to the rising status of people of Moroccan descent in Dutch society. Moroccan Dutch, they observe, have achieved prominence as mayors of major cities such as Rotterdam and Arnhem (Ahmed Aboutaleb; Achmed Marcouch), as successful writers (Hafid Bouazza; Abdelkader Benali) or as performers and actors (Hind; Najib Amhali; Touriya Haoud).

Although not the subject of Grondelaers and Van Gent's article, a similar trend can be observed across the border: Belgians of Moroccan descent – to maintain the

ethnic focus of Grondelaers and Van Gent's research – similarly have made careers in politics (mayor of Leuven Mohamed Ridouani; parliamentary representative of the Christian Democrats Naima Lanjri) and the arts (author Rachida Lamrabet; choreographer and director Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui; television and film makers Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah), or successfully combine various prominent public positions (comedian, television presenter and lecturer Kamal Kharmach and concert and festival organizer and former politician Chokri Mahassine). If we extend this (incomplete) list to authors (once) based in the Low Countries with roots in other elsewhere, the Nigerian-born Chika Unigwe certainly deserves mention. She married a Belgian and moved to Turnhout (Antwerp) in 1995, and barely a decade later she became the first author of African descent to publish a novel in Flanders (*De feniks*, 2005). She also served on the city council of Turnhout and featured as an opinion maker in Flemish quality newspapers and periodicals before moving to Atlanta with her family in 2013.

Concluding this special issue, Unigwe and the young poet-activist Sacha Verheij reflect on their own experiences with the reverberations of white innocence in Flanders and the Netherlands respectively. In a highly personal essay entitled 'White Discomforts, Black Burdens', Unigwe looks back on her years in Belgium and the overt and covert racism she experienced, whether as a young black job seeker who was assumed to have no qualifications to her name or as mother to four young boys growing up with the problematic figuration of the black helpers of Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas). Strikingly, both Unigwe and Wekker in her chapter " . . . For Even Though I Am Black as Soot, my Intentions Are Good": The Case of Zwarte Piet/Black Pete,"¹¹ illustrate the significance of external criticism in raising the racialized representation of Black Pete for discussion in a climate of denial and blindness. Just like Wekker has done in her additional chapter on the Dutch reception of *White Innocence*, Unigwe probes how feelings of white discomfort are often privileged – even by so-called allies – over the experiences of communities of colour who live racism. Verheij dwells on the burdens of her mixed-race heritage, one of which is evoked in the title of her poignant poem 'Why my Aunt Was Hiding from the Sun'. In the poem she recollects how her aunt's summer-time habit, which had confounded her as a young girl, did not make sense to her until she became more aware of the racial dynamics in Dutch society. Verheij's medium of choice may be different, but her message is very much in line with Wekker's own call for action.

As the contributions to this special issue around *White Innocence* confirm, Wekker has delivered an important, accessible contribution to the discussion of racism in the Low Countries. At a time when the right is openly advocating hatred, espousing highly unproductive binary modes of thinking (us vs. them), waging a war on Critical Race Theory, and disregarding what is inconvenient in history and the present-day legacy thereof in contemporary society, more voices of outspoken 'village elders' of Wekker's standing are needed. They blow the whistle on white privilege, systemic discrimination and racism, and provoke action, in and beyond academia, with an eye on establishing a world in which all may live in 'active solidarity'.¹² As Wekker reminds us in her interview, with a reference to African American lesbian poet-activist Audre Lorde, we should not wait for grand gestures; change can begin with small acts of contestation.

Notes

1. Janssens, *Tweehonderd jaar neerlandistiek*.
2. The conference, chaired by Elisabeth Bekers (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), was organized by (former) members of the Dutch Studies section at the University of Liège: Isa Hendrikx, Marie Jadot, Julien Perrez, Dirk Pijpops, Laurent Rasier, Erik Spinoy, Kris Steyaert, Marie Viérin and Joseph Vromans.
3. Wekker prefers the ‘more cutting-edge approach’ of decoloniality over a postcolonial approach that is too uncritical and not radical enough. Wekker, *White Innocence*, footnote 1, 176; see also *Witte onschuld*, footnote 1, 283.
4. Among these texts are Essed’s *Everyday Racism* (1990) and Essed and Hoving’s *Dutch Racism* (2014), both of which Wekker explicitly acknowledges as inspirational predecessors to her own work.
5. Wekker, *White Innocence*, 2.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Wekker, *Witte onschuld*, 237.
8. *Ibid.*, 235–269.
9. Igbo is Unigwe’s mother tongue, one of the three major Nigerian languages.
10. For some personal comments, see Unigwe’s contribution to this special issue.
11. Wekker, *White Innocence*, 139–167; *Witte onschuld*, 197–233.
12. Wekker, *White Innocence*, x.

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Chika Unigwe is an author and professor of creative writing at Georgia College and State University. Her poetry, fiction and non-fiction have appeared in newspapers and magazines across the world, including *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *Wasafiri*, *The Guardian* (UK), *The Kenyan Review*, *De Standaard* and **MO*. Her latest novel, *The Middle Daughter*, will be published in April 2023 (Canongate, UK, and Dzanc, US). Born in Enugu, Nigeria, Unigwe resided in Belgium from 1995 until 2013 and currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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