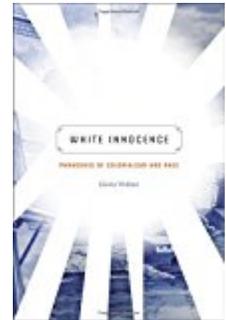




Gloria Wekker. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 226 S. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-6075-9.



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Published on H-Low-Countries (May, 2017)

Commissioned by Nicolaas P. Barr

The Netherlands was once considered one of the dullest countries in Europe, at least politically. Stability, coalitions, and consensus were the hallmarks of its political culture. That all changed in the early 2000s, when the formerly Marxist, openly gay, populist politician Pim Fortuyn blazed onto the political scene and shook up the establishment with his flamboyance and provocative declaration that “The Netherlands is full.” His full-frontal assault on the “multicultural society,” on immigrants, and on Islam, until then taboo subjects, struck a chord with many Dutch voters. His newly formed Lijst Pim Fortuyn (Pim Fortuyn’s List) would likely have won big in the 2002 parliamentary elections, had he not been shot to death by a native (white) Dutch animal rights activist in the first political assassination in the Netherlands since 1672.

The Netherlands, perhaps regrettably, has never resumed its place amongst the dull and dreary nations of the continent. A 300-strong corps of foreign press descended upon the country in the days before the March 2017 elections,

which elicited unprecedented worldwide interest due to the early predictions that right-wing populist Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, or PVV), would sweep to an electoral victory by winning the most seats of any party in the parliament. In the wake of Donald Trump’s upset victory in the United States, and in anticipation of contentious elections later in 2017 in France and Germany, where right-wing nationalist parties are surging, the Dutch elections were seen as a referendum on populism. When Geert Wilders’s PVV did more poorly than expected, a collective sigh of relief swept centrist and left-leaning Netherlands, Europe, and the rest of the world. The foreign press packed up and went home. The Dutch, in the words of the ruling People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, or VVD), had shown themselves to be “sensible” (*nuchter*), and a narrative of the Dutch stopping populism in its tracks and fulfilling their self-appointed role as a “guiding nation” (*gidsland*) was quickly born.

What seems to have been forgotten in all this is that the right-wing populist party actually *gained* five seats from its pre-election position. As of spring 2017, it was the second-largest party in the country, and it was remarkably effective in forcing the ruling center-right VVD and the centrist Christian Democrats (Christen-Democratisch Appèl, or CDA) to shift right in rhetoric, if not in deed. That the Dutch were happy to take credit for stopping populism in Europe, while ignoring the implications inherent in the slow but steady progress made by the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic PVV, is foreshadowed in Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence*, published only the year before (2016).

This hypocrisy—the dissonance between (self-) image and reality within Dutch society—lies at the heart of Wekker's book. In it, Wekker, emeritus professor of gender studies at Utrecht University, challenges the dominant narrative of the Netherlands as a “gentle,” “ethical,” and “guiding” land. She exposes the paradox of a country that passionately denies racial discrimination and colonial violence, yet is, Wekker argues, aggressively racist and xenophobic. This paradox is shown by taking the reader on an erudite jaunt through a panoply of material, from the rather unorthodox, such as email correspondence and surveys, to the more common “texts” of cultural studies—films and novels—to the anthropological employment of myriad personal vignettes.

Wekker analyzes the Dutch media's portrayal of black women and men, the gaping absence of any real discussions of race in Dutch academia, contemporary politics, and, of course, the most well-known case, that of Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*), whose stereotypical depiction of black people was condemned in 2015 by the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In her wide-ranging analyses, Wekker's eclectic examples are meant to illustrate how the Dutch consistently assert that they are innocent of racism, all the while safeguarding their white

privilege. Her thesis is that “an unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule plays a vital but unacknowledged part in dominant meaning-making processes, including the making of the self, taking place in Dutch society” (p. 2). Wekker makes it her task to bring this “meaning-making process” to light by discussing the “cultural archive” built up over four hundred years of colonialism, a term that she owes to Edward Said's enormously influential *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The “archive” can be constructed from paper documents, but also an immaterial reservoir of memories and associations that is constantly deepened through social and historical developments.

The book has five chapters, each of which is meant to illustrate a different manifestation of racial thinking in the Netherlands. The first chapter, “‘Suppose She Brings a Big Negro Home’: Case Studies of Everyday Racism” is, at its core, a discussion of how minorities are consistently reminded that they are Others. One such mechanism is when a white Dutch person makes a “joke” about race or about a person of color. In this way, s/he can get away with expressing racist thoughts “innocently” and not be “punished” for it because, after all, it's “just a joke.” In fact, the strategy works quite well, because if one objects to the “joke,” one is a poor sport. And it's not just “jokes.” Minorities are othered in daily interactions, as her own personal experience as a woman of color with the Amsterdam traffic police brought home to her. Despite the fact that she had lived in the Netherlands since she was a year old, when her family moved from the former Dutch colony of Suriname, and is a highly educated woman, she was treated as a criminal and even briefly incarcerated.

Wekker's personal experiences are again one of the central “texts” from which she draws her analysis in the second chapter, “The House that Race Built,” in which she confronts the deeply en-

trenched institutional racism that pervades both the Dutch academy and Dutch governmental institutions. Wekker has worked in both, and builds upon her decades-long engagement in these spheres to sketch how race is (not) dealt with. There are the routine incidents, such as when she was mistaken by a white man for the cloakroom attendant rather than the experienced civil servant that she was—just one of the many times Wekker was confronted with “a dominant, gendered, and racialized chain of associations and its concomitant social expectations” (p. 57). But the main point of the chapter is the discomfort in Dutch academia when race is brought into the picture. Intersectionality and postcolonialism seem not to have arrived in the Netherlands, if Wekker’s experience is anything to go by, and the fear and anxiety with which even her colleagues in gender studies dealt with issues of race and ethnicity are striking. According to Wekker, race is “bracketed” in the academy and, therefore, is incompletely incorporated into cultural analysis.

The third chapter is the one least based on these sorts of personal experiences. Instead, it is a speculative discussion of a 1917 psychoanalytic case study. Wekker closely reads this long-forgotten document and asserts that it has “far-reaching consequences for our understandings of the place of race in the Dutch cultural archive” (p. 81). The fact that it has been long forgotten until Wekker brought the case of five (presumably white) Dutch women complaining of enlarged labia minora—which they referred to as “Hottentot nymphae”—begs the question: how “far-reaching” could the consequences of this case be? Be that as it may, it is an interesting analysis of the ways in which the psychoanalyst, J. W. H. van Ophuijsen, dealt with these women. The women had, apparently, racialized their symptoms, as they associated “hypersexuality” with black women. In response, Van Ophuijsen instead viewed their complaints as coming from a “masculinity complex.” In this, he

privileged a gendered interpretation rather than a racialized one.

Homosexuality is the topic of the fourth chapter, provocatively entitled, “Of Homo Nostalgia and (Post) Coloniality: Or, Where did All the Critical White Gay Men Go?” In it, Wekker discusses gay politics in the Netherlands over the past few decades, including the paradoxical role of Pim Fortuyn in mobilizing populist, anti-Islam support, and its entanglement with race. She juxtaposes the trajectories of the women’s liberation movement with that of Dutch white gay men. One might ask: how does this issue intersect with race? Wekker’s rather speculative answer is that Fortuyn’s exuberant declarations of his enjoyment of sex with young, (Dutch-) Moroccan men showed that his—and by extension we are to assume—many (?) or most (?) gay white Dutch men’s “sexual positioning through the grammar of race ... represents black people and others by foregrounding a construction of their sexuality as one that needs to be controlled” (p. 137).

It is in the last chapter of the book, “... For Even Though I Am Black as Soot, My Intentions Are Good”: The Case of Zwarte Piet/Black Pete,” that the arguments that have been made in the rest of the work come together in the most concrete and coherent way. In this chapter, the paradox of the self-representation of many white Dutch people comes to the fore. It is, as Wekker has shown, undeniable that there are many negative depictions of black people circulating within the Dutch “cultural archive.” Foremost among these is “Black Pete,” St. Nicholas’s black “helper” who capers around delivering gifts to Dutch children in the weeks leading up to the 6th of December. St. Nicholas has many of these “Black Petes,” who parade around in blackface, sport afro wigs, and play the none-too-bright sidekick to the wise, benevolent white man. As Wekker shows, most Dutch people to this day see it as an innocent tradition that has nothing to do with racism. In fact, it is staunchly defended amongst even the white

liberal elite as being an innocent (that word again!) and irreplaceable part of Dutch culture. The UN's declaration that the depiction of "Black Pete" is, in fact, racist incurred ire and annoyance amongst a population unwilling to confront its complicated relationship to race and its colonial past, as the rest of the the book demonstrates.

Not surprisingly, this complicated relationship so clearly exposed in Wekker's book occasioned a great deal of discussion in the Netherlands. *White Innocence* was reviewed in the major national newspapers, and Wekker was interviewed on popular TV programs. One of these reviews, in the highly respected Dutch national *De Volkskrant*, was indicative of these discussions.[1] Philosopher Baukje Prins wondered if Wekker was not alienating her "allies" by asserting that every white person in the Netherlands was a racist, and a flood of (online) commentary followed. This controversy may have been what Wekker was intending with her book: starting a nationwide conversation about race and colonialism's legacies in a country that, as her book shows, is little accustomed to confronting these thorny issues. And this public debate, though lamentably brief (little has been written or discussed about the book since the summer of 2016), shows who her real audience is: the Dutch cultural and intellectual elites whose smugness she rightfully decries.

One wonders, then: why was the book written in English and published by an American academic press? The "cultural archive" to which she refers and often draws upon to make her argument will be obscure to her non-Dutch readers, and her examples are almost impossible to explain succinctly, despite Wekker's attempts to do so. Take for instance her discussion of narratives of race and black bodies in the Netherlands. She focuses on an episode of a popular Dutch daily TV show, *De Wereld Draait Door* (The world keeps turning). In this episode, the host jokingly expresses that one of his biggest fears is that one of

his teenage daughters will "bring a big negro home" (p. 33). If one had seen the TV program or was familiar with the presenters and guests, it might make sense, but otherwise it is a rather long and tedious digression from the main point—that minorities will never really be seen by white Dutch people as belonging in the Netherlands, despite the pressure on them to do so, and that racism is veiled in "jokes." Even someone such as myself—a person who has lived in the Netherlands for over seventeen years, did her PhD here, works at a Dutch institution, speaks the language, and has a Dutch spouse, in-laws, and friends—in short, is quite integrated at all levels—could not fully access nor understand all Wekker's references and allusions. This means that it will be exponentially more difficult for the academics to whom *White Innocence* is ostensibly directed. That is a shame, because I think Wekker has something very important to say both to the Dutch, of course, but also to a wider audience. As Wekker's book shows, the Dutch case is all too often left out of larger discussions around race and (post)colonialism in an academic landscape that is dominated by Anglo and, to a lesser extent, francophone literature. That is why it would have been of great benefit had Wekker linked her discussion to larger arguments about colonialism and race in scholarly circles instead of leaving the conversation centered upon largely unknown Dutch examples.

White Innocence is the culmination of Wekker's work over decades. As such, it has the breadth and vision of someone who has thought about—and, as the copious personal anecdotes attest—lived the issues of race and the legacies of colonialism daily. However, as a book that has been thought about, if not written, over decades, it is fragmented. The five chapters (plus conclusion) sometimes seem to be separate discussions entirely, though, admittedly, all dealing with the larger issues of race in the Netherlands. This choppiness sometimes takes away from the force

of the argument and obscures the overall point of the book.

In the end, this is a book that will please few people. Academics may find her approach too speculative, and will likely find the arguments to rely too heavily upon personal experiences and perceptions. Political activists and commentators will think it too diffuse, and the average reader will perceive it to be too scholarly and not accessible enough. This, too, is a shame, but it is also the strength of the book. It is a book that confronts a difficult topic head on. The author has chosen to write it in her own eclectic way, and refuses to be confined by the conventions of either academic publishing or “popular” scholarship. I applaud Wekker’s efforts, and hope that, despite the book’s limitations, it will have an impact on international scholarship around race and the legacies of colonialism

Note

[1]. Baukje Prins, “Zo krijgt Wekker geen bondgenoten,” *De Volkskrant*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/zo-krijgt-wekker-geen-bondgenoten~a4335635/>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-low-countries>

Citation: Jessica V. Roitman. Review of Wekker, Gloria. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. H-Low-Countries, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

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