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Reflections

A Conversation with Gloria Wekker

Rivke Jaffe

Gloria Wekker is Emeritus Professor of Gender and Ethnicity at Utrecht University in The Netherlands. She is a social and cultural anthropologist, who attained her master's degree in 1981 from the University of Amsterdam. In 1992 she received a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), with a doctoral dissertation on Afro-Surinamese women's sexuality. Following employment as a teaching associate at UCLA and then as an Assistant Professor at Oberlin College in Ohio, United States, she returned to The Netherlands in 1993 to take up research and teaching positions at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and Utrecht University. She became a full Professor at Utrecht University in 2001. She has also worked as a policy advisor and consultant to various Dutch government ministries on topics related to ethnic minority, women's emancipation and health policy. Her publications include *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016) and *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

Her research covers central themes such as intimacy, embodiment and affect, which she connects to political and economic structures that work across different scales, from the household and the local level through to the national, transnational or intra-imperial scale. Her work is explicitly intersectional, understanding gender and sexuality as analytically inseparable from race and class. While she has focused on Suriname as part of the Black diaspora, her work also engages with The Netherlands, where she has analysed how academic, popular and policy-oriented modes of knowledge production shape and are shaped by systemic inequalities. In this conversation, Rivke Jaffe invites Gloria Wekker to reflect on her academic trajectory and on how her work connects to attempts to decolonize academia, both in The Netherlands and beyond.

How do you see the development of your ideas and research interests over the course of your career, and your life? What impact have various personal experiences, political developments and connections to different intellectual and institutional networks had on your work?

I always tend to think about my work as deeply informed by intersectionality, and that affords me a great many possibilities: focusing on sexuality and then of course looking at what is gender doing here, what is class doing here? That was the case in my books, *The Politics of Passion* and then with *White Innocence*, the topic that had been the main focus of my engagement since I came back to The Netherlands after completing my PhD in the United States in the early 1990s. I experienced a great shock when I returned to The Netherlands and looked at my country with fresh eyes. The familiar had suddenly become very strange. I was struck by what could pass here in terms of race and racism without anyone raising an eyebrow. So, I wanted to zoom in on race of course, but I always take the other axes of signification into account: what is happening with gender and with sexuality? So, intersectionality allows me to bring all these different interests together all the time.

My intended research question, when I left The Netherlands to do my PhD at UCLA, was to know more about Afro-Surinamese women's sexuality. This resulted in *The Politics of Passion*, which appears to speak to a rather small, specialized audience. But *White Innocence* really addresses white people: I am inviting them to take a critical look at themselves and the way they represent themselves to themselves. Through a combination of factors, the book attracted a lot of attention, but my approach in terms of intersectionality has essentially remained constant.

I feel very fortunate that very early on in my life I became acquainted with Audre Lorde (see, for example, Lorde, 1984). She is really like a foremother, intellectually, because she was doing intersectionality without it having a name at the time. It was so clear to me, in the way that she talked, that she always brought those different axes together. While in the beginning I did not feel at home with feminist thought in The Netherlands because it always so glaringly left race out, she showed us how we could think about race and gender simultaneously. She has been a great influence in my life. Coming back to The Netherlands after having lived in the United States for five years, I felt kind of isolated in my thoughts, and so I was very lucky that my work really spoke to feminists and queers of colour in the US and in the UK. I have this group of people around me, who are elsewhere physically but with whom I share an intellectual interest in developing the kinds of things that I have been doing, and fellow scholar Jacqui Alexander is one of them.

Dominant white self-representation, the topic of *White Innocence*, was something I was sure I would have to write about someday. Because race is so taboo in The Netherlands, and it is so comfortable to have this image of

yourself as being an exceptional nation: ‘We are so different from all these other nations, we do not do race, we are hospitable to everybody, everybody can come here and thrive’. This is such an illusion, so I felt increasingly uncomfortable with this dominant self-representation, but I just needed time to bring it all together. Jacqui Alexander calls *White Innocence* ‘the outcome of a lifetime spent in the theoretical and political trenches’,¹ and that is what it is.

White Innocence analyses the wilful ignorance of the Dutch colonial past among the white population of The Netherlands. You argue that we need to understand contemporary national debates and preoccupations in light of centuries of colonial imperial relations. How does your analysis of Dutch society extend to contemporary transnational relations? What implications does this national self-image of innocence have for Dutch development policy, and perhaps foreign policy more generally? Does your analysis have resonances for other European or North American contexts, or is it specific to the Dutch case with its long-standing sense of itself as a small, ethically just country, a progressive gidsland [guiding nation]?

I think there are many connections, inevitably. First, let us go back to the end of colonialism, and it is a different moment regarding the Eastern and Western parts of the Dutch empire. So, we have all these acquisitions abroad, where The Netherlands is the colonial master, and then from one day to the next, these civil servants (people working for the colonial Dutch government) morph from being masters to being in a relationship of co-operation, supposedly on an equal basis, with local people. That has always seemed to me to be such an incredible move — how could that be done? Seemingly without much self-reflection. Would there have been discussions among the group of ministers, or maybe within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, about how this would take place on the ground? That one day we are here as masters, and now we are equal, now we are egalitarian? Does that demand certain other characteristics of the people on the ground? I would be surprised if people had talked about that.

Today, what really strikes me in Dutch foreign policy and in development aid relations — and in our dealings with people abroad, particularly in the South — is how we stress how important it is to have equal gender relations, to have more sexual possibilities available to people. Our gender and sexual regimes are a matter of national pride that we like to export. On the other hand, we have nothing to say about race. That is just not an issue. Neither, of course, do we ever think about how racial relations are structured in The Netherlands or how this might influence our relations with other nations. We are uncomfortable when foreign organizations, like the United Nations (UN) or the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI),

1. See www.dukeupress.edu/white-innocence

interrogate us about race, and tell us, ‘There are a lot of problems with racism in your country’. For instance, following the human rights reports that come out every so often, chastising us for putting the children of asylum seekers in jail together with their parents.² Is this the country that is such a champion of children’s rights? I find that there is a clear continuity with what I state in *White Innocence*, that we do not relate to race, and so we also do not bring it to bear on what we say when we go abroad and have all these sermons to preach to others about how they should behave. I am not sure whether this is an attitude that is specific to The Netherlands, since I have not studied it, but I think that the consequences of coloniality in the relations of the global North with nations in the global South have not been thought through anywhere systematically.

Your work connects to a growing critique of homonationalism in and beyond The Netherlands (e.g. Puar, 2007). Dutch development and foreign policy has ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’ (SRHR) as an important theme. In many ways, the SRHR emphasis looks like a progressive policy, especially if you compare it to, for instance, the recently reinstated ‘global gag rule’³ which prohibits US global health funding from going to organizations that provide or discuss abortion. The Dutch emphasis in our development policies and funding, and to some extent in our diplomatic efforts, includes channelling financial and other forms of support to gay rights movements in a range of countries. Do you see this as explicitly or implicitly connected to a growth in homonationalist politics? What are the effects of such policies outside of the Dutch national context?

I think that it is an expression of our self-representation that we (as Dutch people) have something to tell the world in terms of sexuality, of sexual rights, which increasingly have become more individual or neoliberal. That is what it expresses: how excellent we are. The idea that ‘we are ahead of the pack and we have something to tell the world’ is one expression of that very deep feeling that also is evident in The Netherlands being the international seat of justice — the various courts of law in The Hague. That is who we are in the world, we are about justice, and we know what justice is — whether it concerns genocide or gender and sexual equality. This is what we convey to the world.

I do not know whether you can say that it is bad to have such an international voice, but there is so much blindness around it. I feel that even in

2. The No Child in Detention Coalition, which includes Amnesty International, Defence for Children, Unicef–The Netherlands and the Dutch Council for Refugees, published a report in 2014 based on interviews with families who were put in border detention or immigration detention in the Netherlands. See www.ecre.org/dad-have-we-done-something-wrong-report-on-families-in-immigration-detention-in-the-netherlands/

3. See www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/23/trump-abortion-gag-rule-international-ngo-funding

The Netherlands there is not much room for the study of, or interest in, other kinds of sexualities, such as *mati* in Suriname. In the southeast of Amsterdam there are also women from Ghana who are practicing *supi*, but who has ever studied that?⁴ I do not want to digress too much, but I doubt that I would have been given money in The Netherlands to study *mati*. I had to go to the US, where I received a Fulbright grant, to study *mati* in Suriname. So in the US they were interested in the topic: how do these Surinamese working class women construct their sexuality? Here, homosexuality is thought to be one particular thing, where one follows a particular path to get there and that is the only bona fide way of being gay or lesbian. In its gay policy, the government supports only the dominant form of being gay; others, abroad as well as in The Netherlands, should assimilate themselves to that mode. And yes, in that sense we can say that homonationalism has also infiltrated into policy.

Since this is the thinking in The Netherlands, I am sure that this is also what we are exporting through our development policies, namely that there is only one way to be gay. For instance, when asylum seekers come to The Netherlands, and when they are gay, in their first interview with the Immigration and Naturalization Service they have to say, ‘You know what, I’m gay’.⁵ That is so off the wall, so bizarre, to think that for somebody who has been hiding it for all of their lives, this is the first thing that is going to come out of their mouths when they arrive in this country.

Your work suggests clearly how such SRHR policies might connect to the self-image that the Dutch seek to project internationally. Do you feel these policies might have more ambivalent effects in their implementation, the actual support of gay rights movements for instance?

I have visited South Africa over the past few years, because I have a PhD student who is doing work on female same-sex sexuality there; we had a plan to write about Dutch NGOs in South Africa because the work these NGOs are doing on the ground is very much connected to gender and sexuality. It would be interesting to see when the interest of foreign affairs or development aid became so heavily invested in gender and sexuality when previously the focus was on how to make women autonomous, economically. I think there is a lot to be said for being autonomous economically, it creates a lot of other possibilities. I cannot really speak to what the current policy focus is in countries of the global South, but I have the feeling that it really projects a particular conception of homosexuality, a bounded idea of what sexuality is. While this focus may be well intended, it is also short-sighted and creates massive local resistance to homosexuality, for example, on islands like

4. For more on these female same-sex intimate relationships, see Wekker (2006) on *mati*, and Dankwa (2009) on *supi* in Ghana.

5. See, for example, Jansen and Spijkerboer (2011).

Curacao and Bonaire, where gays and lesbians have come into the spotlight as agents of Western ways of acting that are foreign and adversarial to local views on the world. However mistaken the latter stance may be, it would have been wise for Dutch foreign policy to be a little less self-assured of its own righteous mission.

Also, transgenderism is increasingly on the rise in South Africa and that is very necessary, because the lives of transgender people there are really not easy. People from other African countries flock to South Africa because it is the most progressive country in the region. But again, I find it totally in keeping with *White Innocence* that there does not seem to be any interest in how people themselves conceptualize their own sexualities. Is it a matter of being fixed on the inside, that this is who and how you are? Or is it a practice? Questions like that I think really escape us. And this comes from a position of self-complacency.

Extending the intersectional theme, can you understand the politics of sexuality without asking, for instance in South Africa, what the role of apartheid has been? If we think of how economic policy, such as black economic empowerment policies, can address the legacy of apartheid, can we separate it from thinking about sexual violence?

Would it be likely that in the case of South Africa, we — the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that is — would be able to carry out such an intersectional analysis, taking all those issues on board, when here in The Netherlands we cannot? I doubt that that would be the case. It would be complicated to conduct such an analysis, but I think it is absolutely necessary. The history of same-sex sexual relations for white people in South Africa is completely different to that of black and coloured people. Even though they have the most progressive constitution in the world, it is really hard for anybody other than white, middle-class, gay people to claim those rights, and if you do not have the economic possibilities to claim those rights, what is there in place to support you?

Geopolitical relations really complicate the possibilities to provide support from Europe. In Jamaica, the focus of my own research, there is a long-standing gay rights movement, and there is quite a lot of international interest also in funding local organizations. However, these organizations find it difficult to accept support from foreign NGOs or governments, because this makes it easier for critics to frame their work as the imposition of a US–European colonial agenda. When the UK's then Prime Minister, David Cameron, threatened to make UK development aid to Jamaica conditional on legal reform around sexuality, this attempted external intervention backfired, since too many people viewed it as a type of colonialism. Similarly, in the Middle East, local gay rights activists find it difficult to accept support from foreign donors who are associated with military interventions and different types

of colonialism and imperialism. They feel it makes their own position less tenable and amounts to a 'pinkwashing' of military occupation (see Habib, 2016).

I can certainly imagine that that is also happening in a lot of other places. But the situation is even more complicated in parts of Africa and in the Caribbean. Politics in these regions are intricate and neocolonial, with the US state department investing a great deal of money in religious organizations that go to Africa to spread the homophobic word, that homosexuality is un-African. That elicits a lot of affective responses and people go along with it. I see the same thing happening in Suriname; all kinds of religious organizations can come in and preach the most retrograde religious messages and people eat it up. It is terrible, so disquieting. When homosexuality is depicted as something that did not originate there [in Africa], which many African leaders like to say, then it dovetails with those sects that come and preach there. I find it quite disheartening to see.

Thinking about the production of knowledge around development, and around colonialism, I studied in Leiden in the 1990s, a field that at the time was called Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Non-Western Societies. Now it is called Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology. Other universities have also combined Anthropology and Development Studies to fall under the same university department. I see this shift as one that has reframed studies of 'the Other', first developed in the service of colonial bureaucracies, in the service of development. While there is currently much more self-reflexivity in Anthropology regarding the construction of difference, and in some departments you now see an explicit distancing from Development Studies, I do not think this shift from a colonial discipline towards a development-oriented discipline involved a lot of reflection on the implications for the politics of knowledge production, at least not in the 1990s.

When I was studying Anthropology in the 1970s at the University of Amsterdam, there was a distinction made between Anthropology and Sociology of Non-Western Societies — on the one hand, the focus was on 'primitive' societies while on the other hand, there was a main distinction from Sociology, which was supposed to be the study of complex societies (that is, Western societies). This division of labour was of course an expression of coloniality, the thinking that automatically assigns positions of superiority and inferiority to different societies, which is the quintessence of the colonial period. All modern disciplines carry the traces of colonial thought and it is our responsibility as scholars to study and teach the genealogies of our disciplines and to dismantle that legacy, through decoloniality.

I do not know enough about Development Studies to comment on its positioning in academia or its content. However, what strikes me as alarming

and as highly significant is that from a gender studies perspective, it is still very much the case that, when it comes to studying women from the global South, it is deemed appropriate to put them in a separate discipline or separate institutes. This is the case, for example, at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague or Wageningen University. Women, that is, white women, are being studied in gender studies departments, while ethnic minority women are housed in centres of ethnic studies. That is, race is silently but firmly at the root of the way that we think about different categories of women, and this in a young discipline that took off in the 1970s. Moreover, this is not just a fluke, because the government also partakes in this way of thinking, where the support for these three categories of women — white women, women from the global South, and ethnic minority women — is spread across three different ministries. This only makes sense from a colonial frame of mind. So yes, there is more than enough reason to look critically at Development Studies.

My experience as a student was also that, while ethnicity was to some extent discussed in the context of mainstream Anthropology and Development Studies courses, race was entirely absent. Class and gender were discussed a lot, but somehow race was channelled into a discussion of ethnicity, and it was not a topic in discussions of Anthropology ‘at home’.

You remark upon several important topics here. First, with recent exceptions such as Amade M’Charek’s (2013) work, we do not study race in The Netherlands, we study ethnicity. We have told ourselves after all, that we do not ‘do’ race. Second, when we do study ethnicity, we only study the other, not the white self. This is generally the case in very different disciplines. Let us take the Caribbean Studies course in Leiden as an example. I have been teaching a guest lecture as part of this course for some 15 years, but it still very much endorses an old-fashioned traditional look at the Caribbean — for example, at Suriname and the Antilles, without ever posing the question, ‘who is doing the looking?’. That is so typically old-fashioned Anthropology, where the self that is looking, the subject of knowledge, is bracketed. That subject is not put on the table as someone that we need to know about; how that person is located and the situatedness of the knowledge that s/he produces. I am very much against that, so I always bring in this issue of *who* is looking. Let us put that person on the table too, and at the same time that means: let us also look at The Netherlands. So when I am talking about kinship and sexuality and gender, supposedly in the Caribbean, I am always bringing in my knowledge about The Netherlands: how do we deal with kinship and sexuality and gender in The Netherlands, because they are inseparable.

Thinking about Development Studies more specifically, there has been a significant tradition of feminist critique, both in terms of interrogating

the gendered effects of specific development policies, and more broadly in terms of introducing feminist epistemologies. The influence of critical race studies, with or without a connection to this feminist critique, seems much smaller (Kothari, 2006). While post-development certainly develops a post-colonial or de-colonial approach to development, much of that has come from Latin America, and not always from indigenous or black Latin American scholars. In your view, is there scope for critical race studies and intersectional approaches to race within Development Studies? Do you have a sense of what that would look like?

I recently took part in the Decolonial Summer School in Middelburg, in The Netherlands, where I had the good fortune to meet Walter Dignolo and María Lugones, both from Argentina, and both very big names in decoloniality. María thinks that gender is really a colonial concept and she also wants to do away with intersectionality. We had an open, public discussion about these issues. She thinks that these concepts are colonial products. I do not agree with doing away with gender, and much less with doing away with intersectionality. I do not agree with the argument that we have to do away with race since we are supposedly ‘post-race’ now. We have barely scratched the surface of how race works, so to do away with it is ill-advised as it will prevent us from doing the necessary work to see it for the fundamental grammar of difference that it is. And the same goes for gender and intersectionality; it would set us back. To me, the significant thing is not that they are not black; race has been pivotal in their work.

I think there are many problems around gender, not least of which is that it has been suffused with race from the beginning. We need to try to undo that heritage and we need to approach it from different perspectives, just as I have been trying to do in my work. Whether you come from a gender studies background or from critical race studies, you need to look at concepts in their complexity, how they co-produce each other and how they are produced within institutional settings that have their own blind spots. So, I think that there is a place for critical race studies, including some of the things we have been talking about already, such as this bracketing of the self.

Somebody who also speaks to me a lot is Johannes Fabian (1983) who has written about the production of the Other in Anthropology. This applies to Development Studies as well, through the denial of coevalness, where we researchers place ourselves in the here and now, and the Other is stuck in the ‘there and then’, in the past. Within academic institutions this movement is repeated in different ways, and I also think that the same thing is still going on within the domain of policy.

This connects to recent work on decolonizing academia (Esson et al., 2017) that discusses the difficulty of decolonizing knowledge without also shifting the demographics of institutional power. If those academics with tenured positions remain overwhelmingly white and non-indigenous, can

you speak of decolonization? How can white researchers recognize our complicity and work against it actively, when it is always easier to point your finger at others but exempt yourself? Can you decolonize knowledge without changing the demographics and the actual economic and political power structures within academia?

I totally agree with the suggestion. This brings up my work for the University of Amsterdam's Diversity Commission (Wekker et al., 2016), which was quite an experience. It already starts when you invite lecturers and deans at the University of Amsterdam to talk about diversity, and what the majority of them talk about is gender and internationalization. We need more women in higher positions and we need more international students; that is good for everyone. But then you want to delve a little bit deeper: what is your understanding of diversity? Nobody speaks about sexuality and religion, let alone about race. The reluctance to speak about those issues is very strong. Inclusive terms are not really used; people feel very insecure and there is a lot of discomfort even talking about it. Yet at the same time there is, again, that self-image of 'We are great! We are excellent! Everybody can come here'.

What I found, what I described for Dutch society in *White Innocence*, totally holds true for a microcosm like the University of Amsterdam. The same thing is repeated over and over again. If you want to decolonize knowledge, how are you going to do that with the current workforce who do not even have the vocabulary to talk about it? In the report (Wekker et al., 2016), we discuss the main findings and our experiences doing this research. After spending almost a year engaging in these debates, I found that it repeats *White Innocence*. The thing that makes it so difficult, with respect to academics, to people in media — who regard themselves as very progressive, 'We are non-racist by definition' — is that it is harder to hold them accountable for racist behaviour if it is all over the place. They project racism onto 'lower-class people' but have this excellent image of themselves — 'We're good, we're fine' — whilst doing the most racist things (see Wekker et al., 2016).

And then there are all kinds of mechanisms to defend the status quo, which very importantly include the issue of quality: 'If we hire people of colour or indigenous people the quality will go down'. The quality is vested in 'us'. Quality is what 'we' are. So how are you going to break through that? Not only do we need diversity in people, we also need it in bodies of knowledge that are offered in academe and those two, although not necessarily, can be connected.

The same argument has been used, and is still being employed, to justify why there are so few female professors. Either they are not good enough, or they do not have the ambition.

Still, I have found that there is a difference, in that one has to come across a very Neanderthal person to find somebody explicitly speaking out against gender equality. Verbally, everybody is for more women in academe. We cannot afford to be ranked among the lowest on lists of countries with regard to the proportion of female vs male professors.⁶ ‘We are right in front of Botswana’, people always say, right? With regard to race such generosity does not exist. There the discourse is quite bluntly: ‘We cannot take them on board, because they do not have the qualities that are necessary’. There is a difference between the way we speak about gender and the way we speak about race. I interpret this as a part of our own self-image that we are egalitarian when it comes to gender so something needs to be done about gender inequality. However, since we do not believe that race is a grammar of difference in society, and we do not talk about it generally, there is an asymmetry with regard to race. The assumption, ‘if people of colour are not in academia, it is because they lack the qualities’, is rife. No one would dare to say that out loud with regard to female academics.

You show how gender and ethnicity have often been ‘silo-ed’, within both academic institutions and policy circles, inhibiting an intersectional approach. In addition, you present an important critique of mainstream (Dutch) historiography as overly nationalist, ignoring the centrality of colonial relations. Can we connect and extend these critiques to the institutional segregation of (mainstream) Development Studies in geopolitical terms, which brackets its focus on ‘the global South’, rather than taking a relational approach to the project of development?

I certainly think we can and that we should think in relational terms about development. This lack of relationality is a rather general phenomenon, I think. It repeats colonial patterns: for instance in the discipline of History, the history of the metropole and the history of the colonies were and often are kept apart; they are separate streams that supposedly did not impinge upon each other. This is interesting, because you see the same mechanisms operating in different disciplinary terrains. It is also evident in the organization of gender studies, as we discussed earlier. What this set-up does (this separation of subject and object of knowledge, as if they do not have anything to do with each other), is erase the power relations between the two (or more) entities involved. This is what decolonial scholars have been talking about: how Europe under-developed Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. By focusing only on the global South, we keep at bay questions about how that situation of ‘under-development’ came about and who benefited from it. We can focus on the deplorable, pitiful and needy other who needs our help, and

6. See, for example, www.lnvh.nl/monitor2015/downloads/Monitor%20Vrouwelijke%20Hoogleraren%202015-web-H2.pdf

not on the self who is benefiting in moral, economic and psychological ways from this state of affairs.

You have taught in the US as well; how would you compare the landscape of knowledge production there with here in Europe?

Where do I begin? My most recent book, *White Innocence*, was received so differently in the US compared to The Netherlands. I have been on a couple of tours to the US to present *White Innocence*, and I have had discussions with master's and PhD students at Cornell University. At Cornell there was a big meeting with community activists and people in the labour movement, with a lot of preparedness for activism post-Trump that also plays into it. But more generally, I find such an openness and a willingness in the US to engage with the different ways of looking at race. People have a different perspective — one that acknowledges that race and racism is not something that unfortunately afflicts some people, it is part of a fabric that was installed and we are still dealing with it, but we are not denying it. The reception in the US has been very warm and welcoming. It is much harder here in The Netherlands to even talk about race, and many people are shocked, dismayed and resistant to do so if you try.

Do you feel knowledge production around race, gender and so on is also shaped by different national funding structures? For instance, in The Netherlands all of our funding comes from the government, which really makes our knowledge production very dependent. In addition, research funding is increasingly tied to policy relevance, which can make it harder for us to work autonomously, to think outside the topics and the general parameters of thought set by the government. If race falls outside the parameters set by development or gender or urban policy, it also becomes increasingly difficult to study it.

I have always found this situation in The Netherlands so disadvantageous, because there is essentially only one place where you can go for money.⁷ If the people at this organization do not like your research, you are stuck, whereas in the US, I have been funded by so many different foundations. Also, running through this is the link between funding agencies, the government, and academia itself. It is kind of a merry-go-round, a revolving-door circuit. You see it very clearly in Gender Studies, as well as Ethnic Studies and Migration Studies. You come across the same people all the time; they are there now in one capacity, then in another, but it is like a closed circuit — so if you are breaking through the thoughts that are circulating there and want to go deeper and look at some troubling issues . . .

Until very recently, the wish to do research on race issues, as opposed to ethnic issues, rendered one 'socially dead', as Orlando Patterson (1982)

7. The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

would say. And that is certainly true as far as funding is concerned. The committees that decide on and divide research funding are anything but diverse. The result of course is that more of the same research gets done and that inquisitive, innovative research questions get shunned.

The one initiative in The Netherlands that was taken to enable more people of colour to do a PhD was quite successful⁸ — until it was abolished under the first Rutte government (2010–12). The intention was not to investigate why all these excellent candidates were unable to compete for regular PhD positions, it was to establish a separate, temporary programme. Again, the same principle that we talked about earlier, one that is deeply colonial, was operative. We did not have to examine ourselves and ask which mechanisms of cloning, as far as race and gender were concerned, were at play. We solved the problem of the lack of PhD students of colour by relegating them to a special programme. And then, when that ended, it was just too bad!

Do you see any emergent possibilities that can challenge the status quo?

I have been on some EU research funding committees and I have found that they are more open to thinking oppositionally than those in The Netherlands. There is a more open atmosphere than in The Netherlands, for doing work that may hurt a little bit, that falls outside of the allowed discourse of excellence we maintain about ourselves. I also have great hope based on the initiatives of students of colour who made the Diversity Commission at the University of Amsterdam possible. They are not putting up with the status quo anymore: they are asking ‘why are all my teachers white and why is my curriculum so white?’.

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