

'I am still hopeful'

An interview with Gloria Wekker on diversity, anti-racism, and decolonising the academy

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TVGN 20 (3): 249–258

DOI: 10.5117/TVGN2017.3.ICAZ

2016 was a year in which the name of Gloria Wekker became a familiar one in the Netherlands. It appeared in the Dutch version of Marie Claire magazine,¹ her TED Lecture *Never be indifferent: 400 years of Dutch Colonialism*² was watched by hundreds, and to this day her Dutch fan page on Facebook has thousands of followers.³ This was the year Gloria Wekker published her book *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, a ground-breaking study on the dominant self-representation of white Dutch people that has opened up a national debate on racism in Dutch society, which was silenced for too long (see book review in this issue). In that same year, Gloria Wekker acted as Chair of the University of Amsterdam Diversity Committee that conducted research on the state of both diversity of people and knowledges through a pioneering framework that combined intersectionality and decoloniality.⁴

For many years, Gloria has been an untiring supporter of anti-racist struggles in the Netherlands. She was the first person to formally introduce intersectional feminist and gender studies in the Netherlands with the publication of a co-edited volume *Caleidoscopische Visies (Kaleidoscopic visions)* in 2001. Yet, Gloria Wekker's academic career started earlier, when she completed her PhD research at the University of California in Los Angeles on the topic of Afro-Surinamese working-class women's constructions of sexuality. This research was the basis for her book *The Politics of Passion. Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (2006), which received the Ruth Benedict Prize of the American Anthropological Association in 2007. Currently, she is Emeritus Professor in Gender Studies at Utrecht University, where she held the Aletta (IIAV)-chair on Gender and Ethnicity at the Faculty of the Arts from 2001 to 2012. There, Gloria also

was the coordinator of the one-year MA in Comparative Women's Studies in Culture and Politics from 2003 to 2012, and the Director of GEM – the Expertise Centre on Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturality in Higher Education.

This interview was conducted in the form of two conversations. The first conversation took place on the 13th of January, 2017 over Skype, when Gloria was enjoying holidays in Suriname after a hectic year. The second part of the conversation was in person and shorter, in July 2017. It took the form of an afterthought on a break during the 2017 Middelburg Decolonial Summer School, where Gloria was invited as one of the key guest lecturers.⁵ Interestingly, both of the conversations are influenced by ongoing local Dutch politics in academia and the arts. In the first part, Gloria reflects upon the relevance of intersectional feminism as an academic approach but also a political praxis in the light of Dutch government plans to appoint a 100 new female professors.⁶ She also looks back on the work done by the UvA Diversity Committee. In the second part of the interview, Gloria reflects upon anti-racist activism in different domains, as well as on the terms 'decoloniality' and 'diversity'.

Rosalba: Gloria, as guest editors of this special issue, we thought that it was important to engage with anti-racist struggles in the Netherlands that precede today's claims for the decolonisation of knowledge and the university. This is one of our main concerns, indeed, that these trajectories, like your own trajectory, are known and acknowledged. So, could you start by sharing with us your thoughts about the context of the Netherlands in the struggle for the decolonisation of the university, especially in the framework of your appointment as Chair of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) Diversity Committee?

Gloria: I think that there are a couple of things striking about the Netherlands as a context for these struggles and they are very much in line with the main thesis of *White Innocence*. That is, while we pride ourselves in a national and international context on being the champions of gender and sexual liberation, we do not do so well on race matters. In fact, we do very poorly; we do not have a whole lot to say on these issues, because we like to tell ourselves that we do not do race at all; we are colour blind. This also turned out to be the case at the university: the self-flattering image that anyone with the right intellectual abilities can enter the university – a universal claim – is still dominant, without realising that people with other cultural and knowledge backpacks are put in a much more difficult

situation to do well, to find the teachers, the courses and textbooks, that have the knowledge that is pertinent to them and to the majority of the world population. That is a very sorry state of affairs in 2016/2017. When I spoke to the students of the University of Colour in March 2015, during the Occupation, I was struck by the little progress that had been made, for instance in the number of teachers of colour and the content of the curriculum, since my own student days in the 1970s – that is over 40 years ago.

What has been on my mind is something that was currently on the news, which is of importance to us as UvA Diversity Committee, but also to me personally: the Dutch Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker, has decided to set five million euro apart to appoint one hundred female professors. So there is a lot of uproar about that again, and the same arguments used against the work that we did in the UvA Diversity Commission, are again coming to the fore, that there are some places, like the university, where you shouldn't do Affirmative Action, since the best minds will come to the surface automatically anyways. But there are a lot of people opposing such claims, supporting the idea of one hundred female professors. However, what is bothering me is that no one is coming up with any ideas about... well, it doesn't do to say one hundred female professors, because if you don't pay attention to decoloniality and intersectionality, it will be a hundred white women. So, how are we going to make sure that these female professors will be diverse in terms of racial/ethnic positioning, religion and age maybe, so that we apply an intersectional approach to this new initiative?

Rosalba: How do you explain that a critical intersectional analysis of this announcement is absent, especially from feminists in the Netherlands? For me, this somehow speaks of the need of political coalitions in a conjuncture like this one.

Gloria: I have been thinking about it, since I am in Suriname taking a break. I don't want to put this on the table myself. I wish somebody else would do it. So, I am taking sometime today to think about: Who can I ask to write this letter? It would be a good thing if, for instance, the Diversity Officers at other universities would pitch in, and would say something about this, but then the issue is that they are not necessarily thinking intersectionally. It speaks about a body of thought that for sure is around, but not necessarily among people who are in the academy. I mean among students, among the younger generations, it is, but not in my generation. It

has been hard to come up with somebody who could say something about this, someone belonging to my generation of feminists.

Rosalba: In my experience with feminism in Europe, it is intersectional or it is not feminism. This is probably because, as a feminist of Mexican origin, I am close to colleagues and activists who are already interested in different feminist trajectories and expressions across the world in which question of gender, race, class, origin, and so on, are of the first order. But then, how do you explain this sort of ‘generational divergence’?

Gloria: You are right. It always makes me smile to think of Flavia Dzodan’s quip: ‘My feminism shall be intersectional, or it shall be bullshit’. So true. Well, it is connected to the aversion to engage with race. It is what we have also encountered at the UvA: it is enough to do gender on its own, race is another thing altogether and you don’t have to do them simultaneously. That is the basic idea still going around. Dominant thinking still is that it is enough and a wonderful thing if we pay attention to gender on its own, gender separate from other axes of signification. People feel totally at home with that thinking, and that thinking excises race, ethnicity, and all kinds of other axes. That all this boils down to whiteness is not problematised.

Rosalba: How do you connect this whiteness not being problematised with what – predominantly – male white professors are saying that, in certain places, there shouldn’t be affirmative action? They are not saying: ‘I am opposed to more women in the university’.

Gloria: As I understand it, they do this through invoking Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution, which says that differences should not be made on the basis of gender or race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or whatever reason. It is the epitome of egalitarianism, in which all of us are equal, we have equal chances. If there are not more women in the university, that is, more female professors, it is because they don’t want it, it is because they don’t want to work full-time. This is to oppose affirmative action on behalf of women. So, there is a lack of acknowledgment of the fact that masculinity plays out in favour of men, and unjustly puts woman in a less favourable position. And, at the same time, there is not even a consideration of what the role of whiteness is. Whiteness is normalised and naturalised; we are not making it an issue, we are colour blind. This is what is going on here.



Gloria Wekker

Photo Rolando Vázquez, made at University College Roosevelt (UCR) in Middelburg, Zeeland

Rosalba: To me it is still surprising.

Gloria: Why?

Rosalba: In part because of the image of the Netherlands around the world, and also because I have been aware and supportive of the recent wave of anti-racist activism in the country against, for example, Zwarte Piet, so it is surprising to me that nobody from your generation of feminists is pointing out the limits of Minister Bussemaker's initiative.

Gloria: It would be much better if, since the Committee has been disbanded, someone(s) from within UvA point(s) this out. Because when I do it, or if we do it as the UvA Diversity Committee, it is again the same people expressing these kinds of concerns. I wonder, for example, if the disciplinary groups who have been supportive of the Diversity Committee would take this as an opportunity to say 'we also need to pay attention to this and that'.

Rosalba: How do you explain that the younger generation might be more willing to speak?

Gloria: I think that younger generations, men and women, really embrace intersectionality. You see it among the students, but also among activists outside of the academy. I think there is less of a vested interest in ignoring whiteness; maybe they have grown up in a different world, in a more mixed

and diverse world. They see different realities out there. This is what I see is happening. Besides, the younger generations of colour have been born and have grown up in the Netherlands. It is *their* country and they do not accept being second-class citizens anymore, like their parents did.

Rosalba: I agree with you about younger generations growing up in a different world and able to embrace more diversified societies. In recent developments of youth activism in urban centres in Mexico that I have followed, there is a clear challenge to gender normativity but, nonetheless, it remains isolated from anti-racist activism.

Gloria: The same is true for the Netherlands. This reminds me of your own research findings as part of the Diversity Committee: that when people speak about diversity, they feel at ease to speak about gender differences and the importance of attracting international students. These are acceptable and imaginable themes to talk about; there is a discourse for them. But that doesn't go to the heart of the matter and comes back in different guises and situations: that it is more comfortable to speak about gender, in some contexts about sexuality, but race remains hard to tackle as it touches different nerves and sensitivities, and looking the centrality of race firmly in the eye would necessitate stronger steps towards egalitarianism. It would mean deconstructing white privilege.

Rosalba: This leads me to the question of political coalitions. You mentioned once to me that, at some point, you tried to organise a Women of Color (WoC) Network in Academia, but this was seen as a discriminatory initiative. Which conditions made it not possible at the time? Do you think that there is a different context now, with all these calls to decolonise the University and the curricula, which could make this network possible now?

Gloria: It was difficult in that moment to get a WoC network off the ground in the Netherlands, when there were so few of us. That is not to say that now there are so many more; there are still very few. I thought at that time of an intra-European network including WoC in the UK, Germany, Southern Europe, the Nordic states, etc. That was difficult then. It was such a radical idea, unspeakable. People thought that this was not the way to go. But of course, when you do a power analysis, it is not hard to see that there are hardly any WoC in academia and that it supports the status quo. When someone is trying to create a supportive network for those who are there,

that is deemed to be unacceptable and undesirable. Goddess forbid that these women would have this kind of support! It would mean acknowledging that race does play a part in the access of black women to the academy and their hiring and retention. So, it was decided that the focus should be more on the theme of postcoloniality, regardless of who was conducting the research. And that, lo and behold, race does not have to play a part at all in that endeavour.

I have been reading President Obama's last speech and in it he is still optimistic, saying we can do it, we can do it. Sometimes I think, how can I remain optimistic in the eyes of everything that is going on? At the same time, I think that it is inescapable to have this hope and upbeat attitude. I am thinking it takes several things to be in solidarity with each other. It takes insight but also the courage to come out and take a position that will not be applauded by members of your own dominant group. The late US people's historian Howard Zinn said: 'To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. ... and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory'.

On the whole, I am still hopeful given that we are in the second wave of the anti-racist movement; from different domains of society we can hear the call to break the silence on our colonial past. It is coming from the academy, literature, the arts, and museums. I also saw it at the Venice Biennale, in which a post-colonial artist who represents the Netherlands, Wendelien van Oldenborgh, presented *Cinema Olanda*.⁷ One sees it in demonstrations of very young people of different colours. But when we look at the UvA, it is a lot to ask of students to keep going, be active, to exert pressure, as they are going through the institution and try to change it. What I think is really necessary is to have people within the administrative centre of the university and different disciplinary groups keeping pressure on change: different levels acting politically, informing each other, and keeping it on the agenda. What is happening now – it starts to sound boring – is that if there is anything happening in the departments, it has to do with gender, something we warned against in the report. The Chief Diversity Officer has not been appointed yet, and there are so many forces ranged against intersectional diversity.

Rosalba: Let me move into a different topic. What, from your point of view, do the calls for, and the framework of, decolonisation of universities bring

to this already hard work of creating and sustaining coalitions? What are your thoughts on this given the local context?

Gloria: I tend to think that the term ‘decolonisation’ still alienates a lot of people and that it is important to explain it descriptively, in terms of knowledge that is produced in the university, and how it needs to be responsive to context and different kinds of people. While working on the UvA Diversity Report, we also worked with the term ‘diversity’, and carefully explained what we meant by diversity. Because diversity can be the most innocuous and meaningless term, but as we used it, it is about numbers of people but also about the quality of knowledge available. That is, knowledges are plural in our view and not limited to the Eurocentric variety. The careful use of terms has everything to do with power relations.

I think that there is real opposition even to diversity. There was a lecture by Sara Ahmed in Amsterdam not long ago and she was using the term diversity and how it is talked about in all kind of spaces. The mere talking takes away the action, as if talking is enough and then people don’t do anything. The people who are hired to be diversity officers are banging their head against all kinds of walls all the time because they are not getting anywhere. So, if that is the case already with diversity, I think it won’t be much better with decolonisation. I ask myself, what is to be gained? This is a problem of power, of giving away power. Whether the solution is in a term, I don’t think so.

However, we didn’t choose the term ‘diversity’ in the title of the committee. Because the term is such an empty vessel everybody can put whatever he or she wants into it. It can be an empty vessel or it can be a very fundamental revision of what we want this society to look like. At the moment, I feel neither one nor the other is happening. So, the problem is bigger than the term.

Rosalba: Let me go back to something you mentioned earlier: this is a second wave of anti-racist activism. Why don’t you don’t call it decolonisation of the university? As one of the guest editors of this special issue, I understand that decolonisation is not a metaphor, but active struggle against racist and exclusionary impulses.

Gloria: Maybe it is because the term decolonisation has not been used so much in the domains I mentioned before. I think one could call it that, because what these domains have in common, what they are striving for, is to present multiple views of history, and especially to take into account

that the version of history we are confronted with all the time is the dominant one that is silent towards imperialism. So, in that sense, you can call it a second decolonisation movement, but the first one was not called that – it was called anti-racist movement.

If we have the chance, we should push for a wider understanding of what decoloniality means. This special issue is an important vehicle to do that. But, if we look at the history of the University of Colour and our own experiences as UvA Diversity Committee in terms of how many problems we had to get the message across about the concept of decoloniality, it seems to me that more work needs to be done on this.

Notes

1. See 'TEDxAmsterdamWomen: hét inspirerende event waar we naartoe willen', Marie Claire, September 2016, p. 55.
2. Gloria Wekker's TED lecture is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMwgzKgLGEM>.
3. Gloria Wekker's Facebook fan page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/Gloria-Wekker-fan-page-146597272099673/>.
4. The Diversity Committee was operative from January-October 2016, following students' and staff's occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the administrative building of the University of Amsterdam in the spring of 2015. Gloria Wekker acted as Chair of the Committee while Rosalba Icaza conducted one of the four studies. The full mandate of the Committee and final report is available at: <http://commissiedd.nl/diversity-commission/>.
5. See <https://decolonialsummerschool.wordpress.com/>.
6. On January 2017, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science Jet Bussemaker announced five million euro will be used for appointing female associate professors to the position of professor over the next five years as an extra measure to earlier agreements in place for increasing the number of female professors by 2020.
7. Cinema Olanda has been described as 'evoking the social and racial complexity of the 50s as an overlooked element in Dutch history'. See <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/activity/venice-biennale/>.

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