

Afterword: A Second Wave of Dutch Resistance Against Racism

PHILOMENA ESSED

When I was asked to contribute to this special issue, we had just launched the volume *Dutch Racism* (Essed and Hoving). With three decades of race critical publications under my proverbial belt I thought I had really done my dues for the Netherlands. Then, discovering that the *Frame* editors are impressively young, publishing while pursuing their Masters degree, I felt defenseless—how could I refuse? The initiative of a special issue about racism in the Netherlands adds to my belief that we are witnessing the force and momentum of what can be called a new, second wave of anti-racism, since the 1980s.¹ In this essay I try to bridge the distance of years with commentaries on personal trajectories and other observations, while identifying continuity and change between the first and second wave of Dutch anti-racism.

There is certainly some continuity *without* change in the following question: “Did you see the TV interview with this Turkish woman? She was really good, but what a pity, the headscarf, I don’t understand how

1. See also Nancy Jouwe’s powerful speech, 4 November 2014. She responds to the ruling of the Netherlands Human Rights Institute that the *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) figure violates the right to study in schools free from discrimination. <http://www.anjameulenbelt.nl/weblog/2014/11/04/nancy-jouwe/#.VFiiPucGo0Y.facebook>

she still allows herself to be oppressed by Islam.” This comment from a fellow student of Anthropology, a feminist I recall from around 1980, could have come from someone else, yesterday. It triggered me to take a stand and register for the 1981 Summer University Women’s Studies, where I gave a talk with the daring title of *Feminism and Racism* (“Feminisme en Racisme” 16–17). Racism was like a thief sneaking into the feminist movement. But the very word was non-existent in the Netherlands, as if only a dictionary item, to be used exclusively in relation to the Holocaust, void of significance to contemporary reality. An active participant at the time in the women’s movement I had solidly identified as a feminist since my teenage years. I liked the empowering connotation, the belief in the capabilities of women, our potential to transform societies into more equal ones. “Our-us-the generic we.” That language changed. Difference became an issue of politics, research, and emotion. Not all women were in the same place in the world, had the same experiences and struggles, as Adrienne Rich at the time so beautifully captured in her article “Disloyal to Civilization: *Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia*” (306).

It was the first time the issue of contemporary racism was on the agenda, that day at the Summer School at the University of Amsterdam. The mostly white audience was silent. But some women came up to me afterwards. They encouraged continuing to speak out against racism.

I got involved in anti-racism through my experience in the women’s movement—the double-edged sword of using the competence I developed in critical thinking as a feminist to identify and problematize racism within the very movement and in society at large. Katrine Smiet, in this issue, also draws from feminism and her conscious reflections on positionality, while discovering routes of women’s anti-racism initiated by Dutch women of color. Her point of departure, two years later than mine, was the Winter University Women’s Studies of 1983, where women of color congregated to protest racism. I did not attend, but I knew that my 1981 voice would not remain a lone one for long. Critical thinking does not happen in isolation.

Resistance involves taking risks in the pursuit of social justice (Thalhammer et al.). Concerned that the very essence of feminism was at stake, that racism violated the integrity of the movement, I wrote a second

article, *Racism and Feminism* (1982), the title a play on my first endeavor. The (white) editorial board of the journal *Socialisties-feministische teksten* was supportive throughout the process, which was remarkable—the article was no compliment to Dutch society. But there was more. Two years later the feminist publisher *Sara* issued my book *Alledaags Racism*,² introducing the concept of everyday racism explored through the experiences of women of color in the Netherlands and the United States of America, including different classes and levels of education. *Sara* took a risk with this publication and so did the courageous woman who agreed to accept the first copy, Princess Irene, the younger sister of the then Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Her firm stand against racism in her acceptance speech during the launch did not need further explanation. In 1986 Princess Irene herself would publish a book with narrative portraits of strong migrant women fighting for equal rights in the Netherlands (Van Lippe–Biesterveld). *Alledaags Racisme* opened eyes and offered recognition. The stories about racism encouraged others to claim voice, but the book also became the target of dominant group denial, anger, and spite.

To maintain courage and hope, international connections through readings, workshops, and conferences were vital for antiracist voices in the Netherlands. Lacking race critical research in the Netherlands (see below), the US body of Critical Race Theories (CRS) served as a source of inspiration, as can be inferred from Aja Martinez' review in this special issue. Two of the key figures in the development of CRS, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Kendall Thomas, used to visit the Netherlands on a regular basis during the final decade of the previous century. Immediately connecting to struggles in the Netherlands they gave their support. In 1991, in Amsterdam for the Law and Society conference (“International Conference”), they co-signed a petition against the closure of The Centre of Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) at the University of Amsterdam. CRES (1985–1991), the first and only race critical theory university unit in the Netherlands,³ consisted of a

2. An extended English version, *Everyday Racism: Reports from Women of Two Cultures* was published in 1990.

3. See Essed & Goldberg for a comprehensive compilation of key texts representing the cross-national nature of race critical thinking in the 20th century.

multicultural faculty teaching, among other things, about racism and related forms of structural domination, what Crenshaw would come to call intersectionality.

The closure of CRES in 1991 marked the beginning of an all but disappearance, for decades to come, of the word racism from political and scholarly agenda's, with a few exceptions of remaining dissent scholars, including Gloria Wekker, Kwame Nimao, Sandew Hira, Teun A. van Dijk, Dienne Hondius, Halleh Ghorashi and Ineke van der Valk. An account of the politics of Dutch academia cleansing itself from race critical scholarship can be found in a different publication (Essed and Nimako). David Herbert's comprehensive contribution in the present issue illuminates and analyzes the depth and symbolic violence of the backlash against multiculturalism that swept across the Netherlands. His article also shows that since the early 1980s our understanding of racism has become more sophisticated, evolving from the construction of "race" as central to racism into a broader interpretation.

I too defined racism in my second large study, *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991), as a process involving complexly intertwined imaginations about "race" and cultural hierarchies. Moreover, the exploitation, exclusion, dehumanization, and humiliation racism came to represent preceded the notion of race, the latter constructed later conveniently with the authority of scientific "knowledge." In the past and still today (some) scholarship serves to legitimate the status quo, in this case, the projected cultural and technological superiority of Europeans. For the book *Understanding Everyday Racism*, still a feminist at heart, I again interviewed women of color in the Netherlands and the US, but this time only women with higher education, thus defying the myth that racism is simply a function of class exploitation (only). The women's experiences, often forms of what I coined "gendered racism," opened a world of covert, subtle, and culturally expressed racism, where the avoidance of references to color was becoming part of racism itself as we can read in Martinez' discussion of today's color blind racism, in particular referring to the US.

But... has "race" really disappeared? The famous Dutch dykes to protect against water—read the carefully cultured international

image of tolerance— notwithstanding, a tsunami of racism in the form of Islamophobia would flood the Netherlands, in particular in the new Millennium, thereby paling the still present racism against other groups. Images of “race” are not disconnected from imaginations about Muslims, but the discourse of Islamophobia was expressed overwhelmingly in terms of culture. Pernicious was, and still is, the non-stop public Muslim bashing, every day, a tool of cultural humiliation causing unimaginable damage and hurt.⁴

Today, some 25 years after the first Dutch anti-racism wave, “race” and “color” are again openly alive and kicking. In the US the backlash following the election of President Obama witnessed denigrating (foremost, but not exclusively) Tea Party references to the imagined “African” in the president (Goldberg). Europe is a case in itself. Race, often in terms of explicit references to people of African descent,⁵ is all over Europe, epitomized, among others in the “monkeyfication” of football players of African descent and politicians of African descent. In spite of the re-emergence of open biological racism, the denial of systemic racism is still central to the reproduction of racism in the Netherlands. This can be inferred from the articles in this special issue as well as from the contributors to the volume *Dutch Racism* (Essed & Hoving). Zihni Özdil’s article, in this special issue, brilliantly analyzes how the hypocrisy of denial goes together with even overtly “racial” racism. Elsewhere I have called this “entitlement racism,” the sense that free speech licenses anything and everything, including racist language and images (“Entitlement Racism” 62–77). A difference with the US is that there will always be a substantial voice of protest against racism and, as important, that racist language going public can have serious consequences, including losing your job position.

Some of the hands-on anti-racism action we have come to know from the US, individually as well as collectively, has now entered the Dutch stage. Anti-racism in the 1980s was clouded by the overwhelming volume of the phenomenon—where to begin to counter racism in all

4. I wrote about this form of racism in the article “Intolerable Humiliations.”

5. For well-informed updates and discussions consult Shannon Pfohman and Liz Fekete, and other ENAR reports.

dimensions of everyday life with only a handful of people. History shows that it takes generations for immigrants to feel sufficiently grounded and confident about their rights as human beings to resist collectively. Dutch anti-racism today is networked; more broadly organized and says “NO”—No more racism. In the 21st century a new generation has joined the veterans of the 1980s—often without much awareness of the struggle then—due to the silencing or ridiculing of voices against racism in traditional media and universities alike. The social media played a crucial role in the re-emergence of public anti-racism, thus also eliciting international support. It often takes particular events around which anger builds towards the determination to resist publicly. Early signs of a new wave in the making were the protests around the denigrating picturing of young people of African descent in the book *Only Decent People* (2008).⁶ Again, women were at the forefront of heated debates in defense of the dignity of black women. Around the same time emerged new confrontational energy around the racist picturing of people of African descent implied in the *Zwarte Piet* [Black Pete] figure. *Zwarte Piet* has become the second Dutch word, the first being apartheid, to make it internationally.

The place of *Zwarte Piet* in the struggle against racism is symbolic for the difference in struggle of the 1980s and today. In the 1980s, one of the slogans was the rhyming slogan (in Dutch): *zwarte piet is zwart verdriet*,⁷ which would translate as “black pete is black grief.” The second wave chants *Zwarte Piet=Racisme*—which needs no translation, neither in terms of language and nor in terms intent: no more silence; enough is enough. It is not surprising, therefore, that this special issue includes two articles about the *Zwarte Piet* phenomenon, a reflective interview by Sarah de Mul and Lieke Schrijvers’ exquisite comparison between the politics of protests against *Zwarte Piet* and against Putin. Guno Jones points to a new dimension in current anti-racism: the use of legal tools. In his article he argues against a

6. The author of this book, in Dutch *Alleen maar nette mensen*, always insisted that he only pictured the reality as he had experienced himself as well. To his credit he would later take a stand against the continuation of the Black Pete figure in its current stereotypical form.

7. Key figures in the activist organization “*Zwarte Piet=Zwart Verdriet*” later published the book *Sinterklaasje, kom maar binnen zonder knecht* (Helder & Gravenberch).

governmental bill intended to create second class citizens through notions of race, class and culture. Likewise the battle against the racism implied in the *Zwarte Piet* figure got taken into court.

Current antiracism discourse is sharp, sophisticated, and solid, as can be judged, among others, from the scholarly contributions to this special volume. If veteran race critical scholars in the Netherlands encountered barriers in the course of their work, the new generation gives hope.

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Philomena Essed is a professor of Critical Race, Gender, and Leadership Studies for Antioch University, and is an affiliated researcher for Utrecht University’s Graduate Gender program. Well known for introducing the concepts of “everyday racism” and “gendered racism” in the Netherlands and internationally, her work has been adopted and applied in a range of countries. She recently co-edited the volume *Dutch Racism* (2014), a collection of essays on the topic.