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## Auto-ethnographic reflections on whiteness

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On Higher Education  
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# SCHOLARLY ENGAGEMENT AND DECOLONISATION

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Views from South Africa,  
The Netherlands and  
the United States

Editors:  
M Crul, L Dick, H Ghorashi &  
A Valenzuela Jr



CHAPTER  
4

# Auto-ethnographic reflections on whiteness

## *Rethinking diversity in Dutch- South African higher education research*

*Frans Kamsteeg, Ida Sabelis & Harry Wels*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter provides a blend of auto- and engaged ethnography in an attempt to push for understanding and knowing beyond the scientifically accepted and the emotionally taken-for-granted. By critically exploring and contemplating painful dilemmas and not-so-glorious solutions on their whiteness, the three authors meander along their professional trajectories and reflect on the contexts of their life histories. As white privileged scholars teaching at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and studying South African higher education transformation processes, we find ourselves often caught in the middle between engagement and uneasiness regarding spokespersonship about racism and related dimensions of exclusion. In three vignettes we account for this journey – in The Netherlands and in South Africa – and address the paradox of engagement from a compromised position.*

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**Keywords:** auto-ethnography; engaged scholarship; South Africa; The Netherlands; whiteness; higher education; decolonisation

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## SCHOLARLY ENGAGEMENT AND DECOLONISATION

### PRELUDE: UNDER AFRICAN-EUROPEAN SKIES

After a lengthy drive through the hills of South Africa's Eastern Cape, and along the cattle ranches of the Free State, we arrive at the lush Tuscan Rose mansion-cum-hotel, just outside the city of Bloemfontein. Our group of academics – three white Dutchmen and one white Dutch woman, an Afro-American man and a Hispanic American man – are about to participate in the sixth annual conference on *Diversity in Higher Education*, co-organised since 2010 on three continents by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).<sup>1</sup> On this occasion, at the Bloemfontein conference, the theme is *Decolonising Higher Education Transformation*.

In the days preceding the conference, we had visited the ANC archives at the University of Fort Hare and at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, we participated in a public debate on the topic of *Decolonising the Curriculum: RSA – US – The Netherlands perspectives*, organised by professor of education, Emmanuel Mqgqwashu. The intense debates between us, the students and staff are resonating in our heads as we walk towards the neo-colonial resort for dinner with the other conference participants who have travelled from Europe, the US and various South African institutes to present their views on 'decolonisation', a timely theme since the #RhodesMustFall movement, which started with the physical, and symbolic, 'shitting' and subsequent removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town precincts in March 2015.

We, the authors of this chapter, decided to challenge the conference audience by giving a presentation titled *Breaking White silences in South African-Dutch collaboration in higher education: Confessional and advocacy tales*. In the days before, our experiences in Grahamstown had inspired fierce discussions amongst us about the restraints of entitlement, spokesperson-ship and scholarly engagement in terms of racism and white privilege (Essed, 1991; Yancy, 2005). Standing, at the end of a warm and intense day, in the air-conditioned Tuscan-style room in front of an internationally, ethnically, gender diverse

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1 See previous publication from one of the conferences. Sabelis, I.; Kamsteeg, F. & Wels, H. 2012. Globalization and diversity – from local quality to global inspiration. In: C. Cremer-Rens & B. Jansen-Schultz (eds.), *Von der Internationalisierung der Hochschule zur Transkulturellen Wissenschaft*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

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and academically mixed audience, we present two different narratives in which we expose our dilemmas. Harry and Frans – white and male – reflect on the long trajectory of academic research cooperation between the VU and its many, historically predominantly white Afrikaner, South African academic partner institutions. It becomes a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 2011) of a field riddled with uncomfortable situations, choices and relationships that we label as, likewise, coloured by different shades of compromise and complicity. Ida – white and female – then takes over to finish on a different note by telling her advocacy tale: as a feminist and (political) activist, she invokes her diversity consultancy and university (protest) experience to plead for a different view on the safe spaces concept while explicitly addressing complicity and contiguity (Oseen, 1997; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013). This is a more active position, not confined to listening, which sensitises and negotiates change on the dominator’s side, precisely because of a striving for decolonisation and out of the conviction that it takes genuine solidarity to bring about change. We left the event with the troublesome puzzle of whether we are entitled to speak on the issues at stake – transformation, decolonisation and whiteness – from the safe spaces of our own little European university, which we only occasionally leave to visit similarly safe – if not white – spaces in South Africa. Or, should we follow Vice’s (2010) argument that, in the wake of their complicities (Steyn, 2011; Sanders, 2002), whites should consider retreating in silence and “if possible, humility” (Vice, 2010:338)?<sup>2</sup> What should engagement entail? What mix of strategies is supportive and ‘makes a difference’ in the just and heated debates about positioning, identity, and justified anger?

Our talk triggered reflective comments from only a few people in the audience. Were people silenced by the unorthodox angle from which we addressed the topic? Perhaps it was a timing issue – we presented at the end of a long day of talks; perhaps it was the topic itself that left the audience in a reflective rather than a responsive mode. We too, felt a little perturbed – does this self-reflexive,

2 André Keet, former director of the International Institute for the Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice, at the University of the Free State, South Africa, was part of the audience listening to our joint presentation. Although he praised our ‘courage’, his view on ‘white silence’ differs from Vice’s article. In the research framework of this institute, he comments: ‘I found her ‘struggles’ fascinating and productive, but the ‘silence’ is already deafening. I am not convinced that a shame-induced silence (a silence that is more silent than silence) is the way to go. The inverted possibility that ‘the silence’ may reproduce privileged spectator spaces, not so different from that of the ‘white liberal’ university critic of apartheid in the 1980s and 1990s, is way too real. Authentic moral action can only take shape through social engagement’ (Keet, 2011:36).

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autobiographic ‘coming out’ regarding the limits and demands of engagement make sense in an environment that breathes a both familiar and strange sort of Eurocentrism, and which is supposed to be focused on academic exchange? Was it just another, somewhat cheap attempt to show moral superiority or, contrarily, a rather weak, even shallow way of legitimising our passivity? Or is this hindsight, viewed from a white male perspective, one-sided and ultimately unproductive – as the female voice in our group would have it?

What is the point of telling personal stories and posing self-reflexive questions? Why do we even think they are worth revealing in an academic publication like this? In short, so what? Our tentative answer in this chapter is a combination of showing how raised awareness of the complexities of the debates about diversity and racism, despite leading to personal and intellectual confusion, can be used to open up and recognise injustices in which we are all implicated and complicit. In such a process, confusion about one’s own position and developing awareness becomes a dialectical imperative to reinforce standpoints and unfold possible sensitivities that usually remain hidden. This paves the way for looking at opportunities and strategies for living our lives in this situation, as well as acting against racism and other forms of oppression and systematic exclusion. As we see it now, this is not about creating opportunities or strategies of hope, or about ‘dreaming of a better world’, Martin Luther King-style. Nor is it about yet another attempt to contribute, critique or show our knowledge and ignorance about the extensive literatures and debates on whiteness in South Africa or elsewhere, although we touch on its various aspects and avenues in the process of this chapter. What we propose here is inspired by the perhaps unusual bringing together of Ta-Nahisi Coates’s *Between the world and me*, on the impossibility of structurally improving race relations in the United States (Coates, 2017),<sup>3</sup> and Bruno Latour’s *Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the new climate regime* (2017). Similarly to Coates, Latour argues that we are indeed beyond ‘repairing’ or saving the climate, and therefore we had better refrain from ambitious climate change projects that only produce a false sense of hope. We can – and must – only persevere, do what we can and continue living our lives in subtle ways of despair. Evidently, Coates and Latour did not write their books in relation to each other, but they share the view that man (or a particular group of men) should give up

3 See also: Grady, C. 2017. Colbert asked Ta-Nehisi Coates if he has hope for America. Coates said ‘no’. Vox. Available: <http://bit.ly/314XYnl> [accessed 16 April 2018].

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the illusion or hope of being capable of making structural intents that repair and redeem. For Latour (2017), it means that mankind must live in the ruins of climate change and desperately continue to act against the odds. For Coates (2017), it means that the condition for changing race relations in the US is one where whites radically accept and give up their white privileges, but that there is no hope that it will end racism. In our presentation at the Bloemfontein conference, we first showed the *state of mind* required to embrace and accept the critical perspectives on whiteness and its various consequences.

In this chapter it is not our goal to further theorise on whiteness, but to reflect on how the state of mind of each of us feeds this critical knowledge in order to bring discussion further, to go beyond individual introspection, and to find ways for new and responsible<sup>4</sup> dialogues and actions leading ultimately to influence the institutionalised realms (Tate & Page, 2018:151). What we do is comparable to what is suggested by authors who try to find words for describing how to push for understanding and knowing beyond the scientifically accepted, and even for exploring the boundaries of knowledge. In anthropology this ‘state of mind’ argument is most fundamentally explored in research across the species divide (Dalke & Wels, 2016; Ellis, 2018; Nathen, 2018; Kohn, 2013). In this chapter we try to raise a state of mind, develop our thinking, and perhaps our acting, in a text that critically explores the painful dilemmas and not-so-glorious solutions along the different paths we each walk(ed) by contemplating whiteness from the contexts of our backgrounds, blending auto- and engaged ethnography<sup>5</sup> in an attempt to ‘continue to act against the odds’ by making a contribution to gradually dismantling whiteness (Yancy, 2005:232). In line

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4 During anti-racism and anti-sexism training in the 1970s and 1980s the topic of ‘guilt’ was thriving, the point being – as a position of guilt usually triggers helplessness (and shame), positions of learning about racism and consecutively adopting ‘responsibility’ trigger a far better, and active attitude. Compare Van den Broek, 1987.

5 We consciously choose for the concept of ‘engaged ethnography’ (Ghorashi & Wels, 2009) instead of the maybe more widely known concept of ‘engaged scholarship’ (Van de Ven, 2007). Van de Ven’s engagement (in relation to scholarship) focuses on “a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in studying complex problems” (Van de Ven, 2007:9). He uses the word ‘engaged’ to signify engagement with different stakeholders, while we use the word ‘engaged’ (in relation to ethnography) to signify a moral commitment to ourselves and the environments in which our research takes place. This morality though should *not* be read as taking a moral high ground, but rather contrarily, it expresses the ambiguous nature of social relationships and contexts, and our problematic moral positionings in relation to them over time.

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with this ‘state of mind’ approach, we make use of the general framework and concepts of critical whiteness studies, without explicitly engaging in a theoretical debate with them.

However vulnerable, the act of discovering and addressing whiteness, with the aim of dismantling white privilege, will inevitably bring anti-racist struggles into the open, especially in higher education contexts in The Netherlands and South Africa, where we have the privilege to work. This ‘privilege’ means that whiteness has long shaped our state of mind. We now try as best as we can to critique and counter these structural (cultural) forms of white racism in our teaching at the VU and in our daily living in Dutch society. In our vignettes, we explore our states of mind as developed in The Netherlands. Living in The Netherlands and being born in the 1950s and 1960s, we cannot deny nor escape that our state of mind is primarily shaped in the context of the dynamics of identity politics in Dutch society with its many forms of overt and covert racisms. The normalcy of whiteness and the ‘everyday racism’ flowing from this has extensively been described by Wekker (2016), Weiner (2014), as well as Essed and Trienekens (2008). In our auto-ethnographic vignettes we self-critically explain how our state of mind has slowly been reshaped, and how this change has permitted our repositioning in the whiteness debates, including those in South Africa in higher education, to go in different directions.

### ON THE WAY TO A MORALLY ENGAGED APPROACH

In higher education, spaces that have been silently white are now making themselves heard. In post-apartheid South Africa, part of the formerly dominant white minority is resisting the fact that it must now share rooms with those who, until recently, could be kept outside. All formerly separate public spaces are now public and officially accessible for all. Yet for some, what Jansen (2009) called ‘knowledge in the blood’, is telling them that they still own the places and spaces they used to define as theirs. In The Netherlands, the ‘whiteness-debate’ has recently re-entered discussions about diversity. This is most clearly visible in the numerous symbolic but fierce fights over cultural heritage with an ongoing colonial (or neo-colonial) undertone. It is hard to problematise what we would like to term the ‘inclusion of whiteness’ or address the taken-for-granted power of the powerful in diversity debates. This becomes clear via the persistent othering or overlooking of the role of white



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(male), class-related dominance in diversity debates, and the lack of alterity politics (Janssen & Steyaert, 2003) felt and lived in most of the contexts we function and live in.

A caveat should be made here. Just like the books of Coates (2017) and Latour (2017) were never meant for each other, but nevertheless strongly speak to each other, our narratives were neither crafted, nor manicured to develop a single argument or reading. In a way, they were not framed to tell a single story, just as our professional lives were originally not meant to merge. It was academia that brought us together in one institutional frame, and that links us through our South African networks. Nevertheless, our personal vignettes have started to speak to each other, following our decision to write them and link them to the 'big(ger) questions' of Dutch-South African research in higher education. Where our vignettes converge and/or diverge is, of course, partly up to the reader. What we ourselves draw from it, we share in the concluding section of this chapter.

### THREE VIGNETTES – AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON POSITIONS AND POSITIONING

#### Vignette 1 - Cooling the warm bath: Beyond the emotional hypocrisy of whiteness (Frans)

In October 2017, I asked the students taking my master's course on sense-making in organisations to reflect on the concept of emotional hypocrisy. Most of them correctly explained that, in our professional lives, we all situationally play staged and scripted emotional roles (Fineman, 2000:12). Marking my students' exam papers, I was confronted with the hypocrisy in my own professional – and personal – life as a white Dutch researcher in post-apartheid South Africa since 2004. During my last visit to what Vice (2010, 2015) calls 'that strange place' – concretely, a former Afrikaner university in Potchefstroom – the increasing emotional gap between feeling 'in my element' and feeling 'out of place' further urged me to reflect on my trajectory as a white researcher in that black-and-white coloured space called South Africa, and even think on the awkward question of whether there is, in fact, a legitimate space for me there. In my quest for an answer, I embark on some academic, auto-ethnographic soul-searching.

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As an anthropologist, I have been trained to study cultures other than my own, and in the 1980s and 1990s I conducted research in Peru and Chile among mostly poor township Pentecostals (Kamsteeg, 1997). In the Latin American field, my – physical and cultural – otherness was a subject for what I then considered social banter, especially in my relationships with the mostly indigenous – ‘Indian’ – church and township inhabitants in Peru. Yet, when I changed research sites from the ethnically segregated Peru to the largely monocultural Chilean society, I hardly noticed this, hence I did not pay much attention to the fact that, in Chile, I was white among whites again, not even in the reflective parts of the PhD dissertation I defended in 1995 (Kamsteeg, 1998). In hindsight, and given the massive body of literature on ‘the Indian problem’ in Peru, of which I was well aware, I can hardly understand why I never seriously reflected on my position in terms of race and skin colour, even though the critical social scientists I met and whose work I read, regularly discussed this issue.

It took twenty more years and a move to the African continent to develop a sensitivity for the ways in which my white, Dutch, Protestant background framed my positioning in the diverse higher education settings I have studied in South Africa since 2008. Yet, my first visits in 2004 and 2005 to Stellenbosch in the Western Cape did little to sensitise me about the race issue. I taught two courses on organisational anthropology using a textbook on culture by a Swedish scholar (Alvesson, 2013 [2002]) in which ethnicity, and racialism for that matter, were non-topics. My largely middle-class, white students did not raise the issue either, nor did the few black students in the classroom. After class, I walked past and admired Stellenbosch’s typical colonial white architecture, took a wine tour in the area and visited Cape Town’s touristic highlights. Although I did visit Robben Island, and noticed the names of apartheid’s ideologists and politicians, such as D.F. Malan, on the Stellenbosch university buildings, the nearly all-white character of the university did not particularly trouble me. My (white) host and fellow anthropologist of the day was certainly struggling with the problem, but he did not really bother me with this, perhaps because his own struggle was a long and painful one, as only recently emerged in his ‘coming-out’ publications on the pro-apartheid positions he had taken during his youth and his years as an ethnologist in Johannesburg (Van der Waal, 2015).

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It was the ignition of the decolonisation debate in South Africa's universities (and elsewhere) and, in particular, the student protests that catapulted the concept from 2015 onwards, which eventually forced me to reflect and start auto-ethnographing my position as an older, white-skinned, Dutch, male academic and its consequences for my research and policy work on cultural change at South Africa's institutions of higher education (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2017). It was only then that I was able to grasp the meaning and impact of Samantha Vice's article titled 'How do I live in this strange place' (2010) and translate it into my own research in the 'strange' – yet also strangely familiar – places I had selected to visit, study and write about for years: Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein and Stellenbosch, to name the three I frequented the most.

Although I had co-authored a research methodology article with Sierk Ybema called 'Making the familiar strange' (2009), this was not what I did when I made my first research visit to the small town of Potchefstroom in the former Transvaal province, one of the two republics (together with the Orange Free State, and its capital Bloemfontein) in which the white Afrikaner 'Boers' gained political independence in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My main concern was finding a field where I could combine the subjects that I had knowledge of: culture change, ideological organisations and higher education. My then mentor and colleague in South Africa and present co-author Harry Wels, who, in the post-apartheid years, had reactivated VU's South African network under the SAVUSA (South Africa VU Strategic Alliances) label, convinced me that South Africa was an ideal focal area for the academic and policy work of our alma mater, because VU's longstanding relations with the country provided a solid base and thus a competitive advantage compared to other Dutch universities. I was well aware of VU's ideological (Christian Protestant) background, but had never envisioned that exactly this background would lead me towards studying the vicissitudes of South Africa's former Afrikaner universities. Yet, it is from this cultural background that, in 2008, I found myself talking to the Potchefstroom campus Rector, Annette Combrink (one of Harry's by then many acquaintances in the country), at the start of the South African academic year. The Potchefstroom University for Higher Christian Education had merged in 2004 with the former Homeland University of Bophuthatswana in Mafikeng, to become the North West University (NWU). After a number of talks with key players in the merger process, among them Vice-Chancellor Theuns Eloff, it

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was quickly decided that I could make a relevant contribution to the merger's success by studying the cultural challenges posed by fusing two very distinct and physically separate institutions – campuses after the merger – with the explicit aim of bridging the gap created by apartheid's separate development policy for the higher education landscape.

I was introduced to the main actors in what I later called 'the merger drama' (Kamsteeg, 2011). These were mostly white male university managers and a few social scientists studying the 'transformation' process, as the massive restructuring of the academic field had been labelled, analogously to the ANC post-1994 nationwide societal transformation policy. At the time, I did not really question my own frequent visits to the new administrative hub, which officially did not belong to the Potchefstroom campus, although physically and effectively it did. This building, which I later learned was called the headquarters of 'Potchefication', became the home base of my research project, and my new academic partners there offered me an opportunity to publish an article on the merger in one of the university's new academic journals before I had even properly started my research (Kamsteeg, 2008). University management did not particularly like my use of the 'Potchefication' quote when describing the dominance of the Potchefstroom campus in the newly created NWU, but I continued to be received with the warmth that Afrikaners often display when they meet Dutch visitors. Yet, my innocence was not complete; during the first two years of visits to the university, my short stays at the other (black) campus in Mafikeng never gave me the same welcoming feeling I experienced when in Potchefstroom. Travelling the 200 km back and forth between the two campuses confirmed my sense that, for me, following Vice's argument, it was Mafikeng that was the 'strange place' and not Potchefstroom, no matter how heartily I was always welcomed and hosted by an Indian sociologist working in Mafikeng. Never more did I feel out of place in Mafikeng than during the occasion when I was invited by the campus Rector to sit on the stage during the opening of the 2009 academic year. I found myself to be the only white person present, and hardly understood what was being discussed between the Rector – himself a former student and activist from Mafikeng – and the students. The day before, I had given the Rector, Prof Dan Kgwadi, who in 2015 became NWU's Vice-Chancellor, a lift to Mafikeng in my small car, when his company car unexpectedly needed repairs. The drive had been long because of the stormy and rainy weather, which only emphasised the social, cultural and

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physical distance between the two campuses. The day after, I taught a course on organisational culture – using the same European textbook I had used in Stellenbosch in 2005 – to a racially mixed group of academics, without ever really contextualising the book’s content. When I think of it now, I can hardly understand how I could have missed the perfect opportunity to discuss the Eurocentric perspective of the book, but apparently I lacked the state of mind (or the guts?) to do it.

So, despite being aware of the centrality of the gap between the two campuses, I never did any serious fieldwork on the NWU merger in Mafikeng, only in Potchefstroom, where, apparently, I felt more at home. That said, I did analyse the hegemonic discourse and epic tales on the NWU merger successes by its management and Vice-Chancellor in an article (2011), in which I still avoided reflecting on my positionality and the consequent limits of my analysis. I only began to reflect on the white-feeling-in-one’s-element-at-home (Vice, 2015) in my 2017 auto-ethnographic confessional tale, written with Harry Wels and inspired by Van Maanen’s 1988 and 2011 texts. In that article, Harry Wels and I conclude that breaking the silence on this delicate topic, as a deliberate consequence of us visibly and invisibly, individually and institutionally, wearing the cloak of likeness/whiteness (Kamsteeg & Wels, 2017:14), was a necessary and symbolic break with the business-as-usual approach of our university, and ourselves as its representatives, as well as the institutions that, as former Afrikaner white bulwarks, still had apartheid running through their veins. At the *Diversity in Higher Education* conference in Bloemfontein in February 2017 with which this chapter starts, we tried to take the consequence of this reflection and suggested that it would perhaps be better to follow Vice’s advice and keep silent – at least for a while. We even suggested to temporarily refraining from claims to make a contribution to the (South African) diversity and transformation debate.<sup>6</sup>

6 From 2011 onwards I (Frans Kamsteeg) also regularly visited this university with the similar goal of studying the diversification process in Afrikaner universities. Although the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein has a far more diverse outlook in terms of student demographics, as a researcher I found myself looking in the same identity mirror that almost ‘forced’ me to immerse myself in the similar culture of whiteness (Higgins, 2007; Steyn, 2004; Verwey & Quayle, 2012) as in the other Afrikaner universities. In a sense moving from Potchefstroom to Bloemfontein felt like jumping from the frying pan into the fire (Jansen, 2009, 2017), not exactly the warm bath from the title of this contribution, but metaphorically close to it.

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Since the Bloemfontein conference I have largely remained silent, yet spent considerable time in the Potchefstroom archives in search of data enabling me to reconstruct the – indeed, all-white – (hi)story of the special relationship between my own university, VU, and its longest-standing international partner in Potchefstroom. Although this friendship, or perhaps more aptly, ritual kinship, has already been described elsewhere (Van der Schyff, 2003; Van Eeden, 2006; Schutte, 2005, 2010), a critical evaluation of the mutual identification of both institutions for most of the now more than a century-old bond, is still to be written. The picture of this bond that resounds in the ample correspondence between the then actors directly touches upon my institutional-and-personal engagement. It even regularly caused feelings of complicity, which is probably the result of the emotional hypocrisy mentioned at the beginning of this vignette. The scripted emotions shared between myself, my Potchefstroom (white) interlocutors, as well as between our two institutions, lubricated as well as mystified the research agreement I had made. It increasingly requires serious emotional labour to work in this strange-yet-so-familiar world of Afrikaner whiteness, to which the use of the Afrikaans language comes as an additional emotionally confusing scheme as it is so close to the Dutch language. It feels as if the more historical research I am presently doing provides a solid space from where to restart speaking.

On a more reflective note, I acknowledge that the kind of rationalised emotional work, evoked by the feelings of being ‘in one’s element’ (Vice, 2015) that I described in my relation with and work on the Potchefstroom campus is fed by what Bauman and Donskis (2013) call ‘moral blindness’, more concretely expressed in what Mills would call an ‘epistemology of white ignorance’ (1997, 2007). In response it is perhaps time for the blind (e.g. me) to speak, or, more appropriately, whisper, and articulate the kind of systemic white privilege-cum-ignorance that not only lies hidden in Potchefstroom’s isolated archives, but is also daily (re)lived and enacted in its physical institutional space.

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## Vignette 2 - Diversity revisited: Stepping back and standing up (Ida)

In The Netherlands, ‘whiteness’ has recently re-entered<sup>7</sup> discussions about diversity – and it comes in uneasy guises. It comes on the back of a children’s feast related to Sinterklaas (St. Nicholas), in fights about the saint’s ‘black helper’ *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete). His role disturbs and hinders black Dutch people, but at the same time is considered cultural heritage that should not to be touched. The cause lies in the silence in addressing the Dutch past, while some present the ‘VOC<sup>8</sup> mentality’, i.e. celebrating historic Dutch trading and grabbing habits overseas, as unproblematic. It creeps in via the silence about what the famous Dutch tolerance might actually mean: compassion or indifference, the latter via making race ‘ordinary’ (cf. Tate, 2014). Neither compassion, nor neglect can expose or eradicate racism.

Apart from some symbolic but fierce fights over cultural heritage with an ongoing colonial (or neo-colonial) undertone, it is hard to thoroughly discuss the contested theme of ‘whiteness’, or in a wider sense: address the perpetuation of the taken-for-granted power of the powerful underlying all dimensions of diversity (Acker, 2006), or otherwise, focussing on racism and exposing the racial contract (Mills, 1997). This becomes clear via persistent othering, or through explicitly overlooking the role of white (male) and class-related dominance in diversity debates. In particular, positioning oneself in these debates means reflecting on how we can best engage in debates and everyday practices on the way to change, the establishment and use of ‘safe spaces’ (Roux, 2012; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013) and taking the necessary steps to initiate change from all angles. In this context, positioning means

7 In my (Ida Sabelis) experience, the whiteness debate was already thriving in the late 1970s and early 1980s – not with the same themes, and not as vehement, but still with questioning the St. Nicholas and his ‘black’ supposed-helpers tradition, both from racial and from gender perspectives. At that time ‘black’ and ‘white’ were used in training and education to illustrate the political (power) undercurrents in the ‘anti-racism’ movement, and the role of the saint as ‘sexist/patriarchal, leading up to the use of the diversity concept some years later.

8 VOC refers to the ‘Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie’ (Dutch East India Company), a trading company founded in 1602 which has become symbolic of the Dutch Golden Age (17<sup>th</sup> century) when the Netherlands was one of the colonial superpowers. A so-called entrepreneurial spirit or mentality coupled with some Calvinist traits is believed to be the source of this ‘success’. One of the Dutch Prime Ministers, Jan-Peter Balkenende, coined the term ‘VOC mentality’ in 2006 as a badge of honour in opposition to those who questioned the Dutch identity – he was fiercely attacked by MPs who deemed this neocolonial and one-sided.

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problematism one's own assumptions, and changes over time in order to find a balance between acting and waiting, and between speaking up and keeping silent in order to let others' voices be heard. As the deliberations on 'engaged ethnography' reflect, in one way or another, we are all simultaneously complicit and subjects of exclusion (see e.g. Ghorashi & Wels, 2009). In order to explore how I could possibly position myself in this debate, auto-ethnography seems to provide part of the strategy. This is not to 'whitewash' anything, but to perhaps create a discursive safe space on paper, to follow the urge to investigate where my inclination to solidarity and introspection comes from, and to openly present some of the building blocks for further discussion; in short, to contribute to dismantling whiteness as a continuous and an embodied, ultimately individually rooted project.

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, auto-ethnography seems gratuitous to some extent. Yet, there is never an easy way to reflect on one's socialisation and daily habits – and discussing socialisation might just be one of the tools to bring at least some clarity and accountability to these sensitive and highly necessary debates. Therefore, my contribution is inspired by my own socialisation in the different waves of diversity (over time and topic), and centres around the span of (non-)action: stepping aside or keeping silent is not a solution, but how, then, should we step up and speak out? And what are the pitfalls related to either position?

For me, the most important point of departure is my experience in the diverse emancipatory movements since the late 1960s, departing from the 1968 mood of liberation from the post-war generation and its perceived old-fashioned ideas about tradition and normativity. Norms about keeping to your own faith group, about obeisance, and about tight normative patterns that remained unquestioned. In my case, faith provided that straitjacket and, at the same time, a platform from which to start my actions. It all started with 'renewal' within a Catholic high school (Triniteitslyceum) in the city of Haarlem. We had fierce discussions, resulting in the design and performance of our own 'masses' (church services) supported by the fathers of St. Augustine who managed our school. Some of the fathers, captured by the *Zeitgeist* of loosening the bonds of constricting norms and habits, left the convent and married. Protest and resistance were in the air. We demanded and obtained access to school government via protests, demonstrations, the school newspaper and theatre



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performances. And we were granted the right to co-deliberate over school matters and express our opinion on all occasions. Inevitably, in the wake of hippy culture and the availability of good birth control, the ‘class’ struggle, as we experienced it, began to move towards other ‘differences’. Gradually, women like me realised that we now had the opportunity to develop ourselves and strive to not live the lives of our mothers, either in terms of education and work, or sexuality and relationships, but what about girls’ roles in discussions and meetings? Freedom was in the air, but was not taken for granted. The so-called sexual revolution was a two-sided phenomenon: freedom all right, but *who* would have the right to freedom? Following much older, and heavily internalised gender patterns, as a woman I wondered who benefitted more from that particular freedom. I started to support women who came to The Netherlands for abortions, the first time I felt I could ‘do’ something.

Gradually, I was inspired by feminist theory and gender deliberations, among other things after attending an international gathering in France (*Women for Peace*, Les Circauds, 1976). In the 1970s, I learnt about racism while working in a *Bildung* centre where women, workers and ‘black people’<sup>9</sup> would gather for popular education and action-driven strategies for work and movements. There, in a collaboration with Amsterdam ‘Ombudswoman’, Lida van den Broek, I learnt to deal with ‘anti-sexism’ and ‘anti-racism’ in order to fight social injustice as we saw and experienced it. And we founded Kantharos, originally a collective of black and white women to provide training for schools, policymakers, and among others, policemen and women – today it is a consultancy firm for the ‘management of diversity’. Before long, we realised that there are parallels between forms of oppression. Forms of social discrimination, or exclusion in current parlance, are related to power processes and are hegemonic. They serve to keep people ‘in their place’, and are dependent on women mainly at home and in serviceable positions vis-a-vis men, black people as obedient, waiting their turn, actually considered to belong somewhere else, and expected to adapt to and ‘assimilate’ in a dominant culture.

9 Obviously, the then-valid term ‘black’ is used here. Following debates over diversity and intersectionality of the 1990s, a more nuanced approach was demanded by ‘black people’ and ‘people of colour’. At the time however, everybody targeted by racism was called ‘black’ in order to demonstrate the strength of repression and exclusion (Essed, 1991; Van den Broek, 1987).

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At a time when Dutch society was coping with so many newcomers – women on the labour market, and people from Surinam and other former colonies trying to find their place in the country – it was perfectly clear that ‘newcomers’ are not the problem, but that the settled (the We) should move, change and be active in the process in order to achieve just and enriched forms of living. Additionally, my Surinamese sisters taught me that loyalties are difficult. Should solidarity with women, for example, exclude solidarity with your black brothers, husbands and neighbours? Moreover, as one Surinamese friend commented, how come, when racism *hurts* so much, white people just *don’t notice*? As we, my black friends and colleagues and I, came to realise, it’s very much like the way/s in which men don’t notice sexism. Very much like the way you don’t notice privilege when you have it. The most important thing here was that we discussed the pain and the shame, and kept on analysing the institutional consequences. And therein lies the solution – change is about dismantling the taken-for-granted, the ‘unconsciously generated bias’ as Tate (2014) argues. And in order to achieve large-scale change big-scale, we must start small – the personal being political and vice versa. In sum, those who were active (activists?) in emancipatory movements realised that, in order to live together successfully and make room for ‘others’ in formal positions, organisations had to make room for newcomers. Moreover, the different norms and values of a country or an organisation, indeed, of any ‘group’, should be revised and revisited when others come in. Assimilation and adaptation implicitly and explicitly foster the status quo – and perpetuate exclusion.

All this led to an understanding of diversity (a word coined in the late 1980s on both sides of the Atlantic) as dealing with similarities in processes of exclusion. Addressing and attempting to change the inequalities embedded in existing structures and institutions, explicitly from a social justice perspective. That is to say, fighting and exposing asymmetrical power relations – exposing hegemonic power (also, and perhaps most importantly, when there is ‘no bad intention’). This led to Lida van den Broek’s book, *Hoe zit het nou met wit?* [What about white?] (1987).<sup>10</sup> In training sessions and workshops, we tried to find forms of introspection, of reflection on each person’s own position, one’s upbringing and the embedded skills for othering. Via games about how prejudice and bias work, we addressed change from the inside out. And we

10 The book also appeared in German: Van den Broek, L. 1988. *Am Ende der Weisheit*. Berlin: Orlanda Verlag.

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worked with whole organisations, using their inherent inequalities to show parallels and raise awareness and insights. There is nothing more exciting (and exposing) than when a boss and a blue collar worker discover each other's prejudices and qualities.

Gradually, from the early 1990s, the focus changed from an explicit social justice perspective to a business oriented one. Lida and I worked, via Kantharos, with policy groups, policymakers, police teams, as well as a whole section from Hoogovens Steel Works<sup>11</sup> to develop what we now call a 'business case' model for diversity. I remember late-night talks in a club in Amsterdam – as freelance consultants, we tried to reframe what we knew and found important. From our own engagement, we translated terms and strategies into a language understandable for companies and firms. After all, now organisational anthropologists, we knew that the world consists of organisations, and that is where we wanted to expand our ideas and earn a living. Little did we know that, in doing this, we fed the emergence of the business case approach, in which difference only makes a difference if it produces added value, and preferably as fast as possible (Bauman, 2000). We never realised that we were entering a world of limited economic rationality – where ethno-marketing was just emerging (Nkwando & Lindrige, 1998), and where white would remain the norm for a long time to come.

Much has changed over the last two and a half decades. *Grrrls power* came and went. And recently I realised that despite many changes, and despite the naive but good intentions of the 1960s, some changes have occurred, but those changes require a lot of maintenance or ongoing more-or-less-activist attention. And what if the social justice perspective has been co-opted by company thinking? What if the business case has gained global spread? What if Bauman and Donskis<sup>12</sup> (2013) are right in assuming that the TINA (there is no alternative) slogan is here to stay? Imagine my surprise

11 Currently known as Tata Steel, IJmuiden, The Netherlands.

12 Bauman, Z. & L. Donskis, 2016. *Liquid Evil*. Cambridge: Polity Press. This work, written in dialogue, entails an analysis of current (global) politics and policies, partly departing from the TINA-concept. TINA originates from the doings by Margaret Thatcher in the UK during the 1980s. Her 'there is no alternative' (hence, TINA) politics marks the start of fierce neoliberal/capitalist, and thus class-based, politics that destroyed union (workers/labours') power and paved the way for almost unbridled exclusion of those who "can't participate" (Bauman & Donskis, 2016:13 ff). This development has, in my view, also enhanced exclusion based on other

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when in 2017 a documentary appeared by activist/journalist Sunny Bergman, *The colour white*. My initial reaction was to ask whether the whiteness debate is coming back. Yes, and no ... Apparently, we still face the same type of assumptions, namely that we should look at white in terms of privilege and non-sensitivity to racist and exclusionary behaviour. We must problematise that position, but what does that mean? Similar debates in the 1970s did not really help to achieve change, or only temporarily changed things. Why not? Also, in terms of the gender debate, we have witnessed our interests evolving in waves of attention, a little change, and ultimately failing as the assumed change turns out to have been superficial or not thorough enough, or because we learn about other intersectionalities (cf. Verloo, 2001). A sign that power structures have not changed makes itself clear by processes of co-optation.

Indeed, power relations must be continuously addressed (Acker, 2006). Small changes never last if the movements fade (cf. Verloo, 2001; Verloo & Roggeband, 1996). Co-optation means here that, as soon as new structures (rules, regulations) are in place, we should not lean back and expect that 'it's all settled now' – new modes of repression and old ways return if we do not take our responsibility to be alert and speak out when necessary. But, I am optimistic: the return of the whiteness debate in The Netherlands demonstrates that many white people become aggressive when it comes to real reflection, to real confession. This aggression is a sign of how the debate touches upon the boundaries of people's comfort zones – and I assume that this is exactly what is needed to reinvigorate the debates about exclusion, because apparently any past changes have not brought about sufficient structural and cultural change to create equality. In this context, engaged ethnography can be one of the instruments to accompany societal debates, and trigger discussion when and where it is needed most. It is a wake-up call for fading activism, for failing attentiveness, and a reminder that movements must be constantly revived, as long as structural and institutional change have obviously not provided room for all. Additionally, when I showed the above-mentioned documentary to colleagues in a South African university (NWU, Potchefstroom), a discussion emerged that produced a specific kind of hope. Not (just) because the white colleagues realised that 'racism thrives elsewhere too' (which was a

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markers than class, feeding into individualism and lack of connectivity. And thus opening up for new forms of racism and sexism, to name just a few forms of exclusion.

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first, hilarious reaction), but because comparison of experiences offers the opportunity to discuss whiteness and white privilege in the first place. For me, who never wanted to do faraway research because of the risks of neo-colonial influences, the faraway research in South Africa, cooperating with and meeting mainly feminist colleagues, produces a European counterpoint especially for the workings of whiteness and gender issues.

Silence, reluctance and backing up instead of being at the forefront – can that be a position from which to abandon privilege, to explicitly make space for ‘other’ voices? To help make invisible processes visible, and silent voices heard? I reject that position, not because I want to continue privilege (I hope), but because I am convinced that we need alternative debates and positions in order to obtain the changes we think are necessary (cf. Thomas & Ely, 1996). I prefer to advocate a more flexible position, strategically switching positions – standing at the front, at the back and to the side. A more dynamic position in order to show and live engagement, while at the same time explicitly recognising and abandoning privilege, and sometimes using privilege (or belonging) in order to disclose its consequences, however ignoble and shameful at times.

Stepping out, or stepping back, is not enough; it halts white privilege (and other power-full privileges), but does not openly discuss what privilege and exclusion are about. Indeed, how can we develop a support strategy, one that my privileged position can help reveal the much-needed beneficial effects of ‘safe spaces’ (Janssen & Steyaert, 2003; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013). Take the parallel feminist debates; how far would we have come if men had not stepped in? Of course, in the 1970s, it was of utmost importance to meet in women’s groups, cutting out a space to begin to articulate what exclusion meant. But subsequently, I entered the world of work, where I was ‘on my own’ (among men), and where so many of the cultural and under-the-surface phenomena of gendered exclusion were palpable, and often very hard to address. I remember a situation when there were, again, no women in middle-management positions in the organisation where I worked. I protested, and, as usual, the protest triggered aggression. Of course, perhaps I could have presented my case more strategically. Of course, I could have kept silent, worked even harder and hope to be ‘discovered’ next time. But what ultimately happened is that one of the (male) colleagues I confronted, stepped out of the shadows and

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entered the debate.<sup>13</sup> We had diametrically different views and opinions about the situation, but he insisted that we discussed the matter until we had both fully expressed our insights. And so we did, for several hours, on a long walk. Not long after, I was invited to become a member of the managerial team. Case won? Maybe. But what I remember most from that situation, is the feeling of solidarity and appreciation and the creation of space and time, to really get to the bottom of the problem, which helped restore relations and for us to carry on as a team (until today, twenty years later).

What does this tale reveal about positionality? Not that the male colleague stepped back, or aside in order to ‘allow me a voice’. It reveals the importance of cutting out a level playing field, creating a situation outside the office (also physically, by going for a walk), and of deliberately abandoning traditional positions in order to have a genuine and sometimes very confrontational exchange of ideas – and thus reaching a new understanding for both. Most decisive perhaps, we both viewed the experience as difficult but, ultimately, as providing a genuine solution to the situation.

Without male colleagues and friends and a partner for whom ‘looking behind the scenes’ has become second nature, my position in the gender debates would have been very lonely and ultimately unfruitful. I am convinced that this insight is valid for black and white relations too – indeed all other diversity components. Yet, this means the ‘dismantling of whiteness’ becoming second nature and it also means preventing the movement from becoming self-righteous. This cannot and should not be continuously done by black/colour-white confrontations, but must include white-white confrontations as well. Not only does this help us understand that it is painful for people of colour to hear and witness racism’s workings analysed, but in order for racism to be attacked, it is utterly necessary to thoroughly investigate its taken-for-grantedness, on individual and institutional, on all levels (Tate & Page, 2018:145). Whiteness must be debated and addressed among whites to uncover its workings and to find new ways of solidarity and collective action. Leaning back and being silent is not an option as far as I am concerned; in order to be heard, the protest should not be whispered. It should be loud, clear and continuous.

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13 Ironically, this refers to one of the co-authors of this piece, Harry Wels.

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**Vignette 3 - Despair in academic life (Harry)**

In my surroundings and in the Dutch academic landscape, I am considered to be very knowledgeable about Africa – South(ern) Africa in particular. My ascribed ‘authority’ comes from a *curriculum vitae* brimming with ‘academic proof’ of my accumulated knowledge gained from years of fieldwork research in Africa and the resulting publications in journals and books. Furthermore, almost all my teaching at the VU and Leiden University is related to my work in southern Africa; I have supervised numerous master’s students and a few PhDs in their fieldwork in southern Africa and their subsequent theses, and any visitor to my home will immediately notice the many books and other artefacts on (southern) Africa throughout the house. If anyone starts a conversation on South Africa in particular, I am able to drop quite a few names and historical details, giving the impression of authority. Coming from the VU adds to this ‘authority’ in The Netherlands, although sometimes it is accompanied by a frown or critical edge given VU’s involvement with South Africa and in particular some of its Afrikaner universities, since its foundation in 1880 (cf. Kamsteeg & Wels, 2017). Indeed, the VU had close ties to those Afrikaner universities that later on in history scientifically legitimised apartheid and were, in many ways, involved in its implementation and attempts at consolidation. In fact, since the inception of the New South Africa in 1994, rightly or wrongly, such musings no longer have the reputational potency or repercussions they once had in The Netherlands. In short, I can quite comfortably lead my academic life in Amsterdam and Leiden, enjoy my tenured position, and travel to South Africa a few times a year, as well as keep my authority in shape and updated, as if South Africa were my regular workout in the gym. Getting older in the process means I have become almost the embodiment of this authority. Authority linked to a solid level of comfort, well done, what a career! A laudable professional narrative, indeed (I can almost hear the glowing farewell speech when, some ten years hence, I retire).<sup>14</sup>

Despite this carefully manicured ‘professional authority’, I often feel morally and personally depressed by the work, activities and initiatives that I undertake in South Africa and The Netherlands related to my ‘authority’. So much for my ‘state of mind’. Reading the list of ‘accomplishments’ on my *curriculum vitae* offers little comfort. It is no help that things ‘work out’ and ‘get done’; it does not help that almost no one in my personal and professional network believes

<sup>14</sup> The reader will hopefully have picked up by now that I love irony.

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that this sense of despair is justified. They feel that I am overreacting, that my Calvinist background haunts me with feelings of guilt for things that I cannot be held directly accountable or responsible for – that I shouldn't be too harsh on myself, that such an attitude serves no one in the end anyway. I take their advice and, on the outside, I think I am able to hide my moral discomfort (not least because people start to avoid you if they know a conversation with you could take such a turn). I keep quiet and dutifully play my role of 'professional authority'.<sup>15</sup>

But not in this chapter! In this vignette I take a critical stance towards my often whitewashed academic vocabulary and explain why behind this façade there is some sort of despair (which is probably one of the reasons I appreciate reading authors like Coates and Latour). In order to do this, I embark on an auto-ethnographic route where "(w)hat I f[i]nd is that who I am affects what I observe, what I write, and how others will react to what I say" (Bass Jenks, 2002:184). Embracing intersectionality, where my positionality as an organisational ethnographer is the ongoing process of various becomings – being white, male, a certain age and class, considering myself heterosexual, able-bodied, Dutch, father, university educated, 'authority', ... in other words, my auto-ethnography are my becomings, my states of mind. I want to particularly focus on and juxtapose my secular academic life with my religious upbringing in the Salvation Army and examine what that intersection leads to in terms of my positioning in and perspectives on the diversity debates between Dutch and South African higher education institutions. My point of departure is the telling title of the book by the Dutch 'Theologian of the Fatherland' (*Theoloog des Vaderlands*)<sup>16</sup> 2016-2017, Janneke Stegeman (2017) *Alles moet anders! Bevrijdingstheologie voor witte Nederlanders*.<sup>17</sup>

Before I relate this reading experience and book to a description of my 'authority' on South Africa, I want to make explicit that I realise that writing about this topic in such a personal way comes with risks. The risk to my academic reputation ('this is about a personal opinion and nothing more'),

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15 Compare my position I describe here with the one taken by Ta-Nahisi Coates to whom we refer in note 3. Probably the reason that he is in a late night talk show and I am not is that he doesn't take the advice to 'keep quiet' about his despair.

16 A theologian that is appointed for one year to the position of national theologian. Like The Netherlands also has annual national positions for philosophers, poets, sculptors, composers, thinkers and photographers.

17 My own translation: *Everything must change! Liberation theology for White Dutchmen*.



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the risk of being ‘too personal’ and therefore being considered not analytical enough, of being considered ‘too emotional and political’ to keep the necessary distance, or even the risk of being accused of hindering my academic project by rediscovering religious, theological literature. I am aware that the scientific community might consider and label my text as ‘self-indulgent’, as Sparkes (2002) describes general responses to auto-ethnographic writings. It is a characterisation of auto-ethnographic work that fundamentally undermines its academic credibility. Sparkes (2002:210-211) tells of how the auto-ethnographic work of one of his students was labelled by a PhD committee member as ‘self-indulgent’ and how he struggles to answer what feels to him like an indictment and academic disqualification:

I want to ask him what he means by ‘self-indulgent’. Why not use different words, such as self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous? For me, the dissertation was anything but self-indulgent, and it included many of the characteristics of ‘heartful autoethnography’ (Ellis, 1997, 1999). These characteristics include the following: the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher’s vulnerable selves, emotions, body, and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail, the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical, and political consequences, an encouragement of compassion and empathy, a focus on helping us know how to live and cope; the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and ‘subjects’ as coparticipants in dialogue; the seeking of a fusion between social science and literature; the connecting of the practices of social science with the living of life; and the representation of lived experience using a variety of genres [...].

No matter how you, the reader, read this as confirmation of your definition of self-indulgence or as its antidote, Sparkes (2002:212) concludes further on in his chapter: “I’d forgotten how difficult it is to defend against this charge!” You may wonder if you have to *defend* anything, but even if you have, it might be worth the effort, as auto-ethnography is all about showing how your intellectual thinking, state of mind, develops in your academic writing when finding your way in combinations of private and professional lives, coming together in biographies that start at birth and end when you die. At least, that is my take on it, at this point, and I write about it accordingly. I have done without it, but, because of my many years of organisational ethnographic fieldwork in South and southern Africa I no longer can.

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For many years, I used to read some religious literature in bed before going to sleep, a habit that came from my youth, when I was taught to read the Bible every day before going to sleep. I gave up on this some ten years ago, because I thought it became too repetitive and I wasn't learning anything new. Moreover, I thought that the critical academic literature I was reading was a good substitute. Thus, I continued to read before going to sleep, but no longer with a religious theme. Until recently, when a former Salvation Army officer with whom I play trombone in a brass band, and who left the Salvation Army because of irreconcilable theological differences, gave me the aforementioned book by Janneke Stegeman. Band rehearsals are on Tuesday evenings and this fellow trombonist picks me up at my home and we drive together and talk and talk, often about religious topics. After the band practice, he drives me back home again and we continue the conversation we started on the way to rehearsal. One day, out of nowhere, he gives me the book and tells me that I will probably like what she writes. I am hesitant. There isn't much religious literature I have come across lately that has appealed to me at all; at least none that I think can withstand or has answers to the scrutiny of my critical ethnographic mind and thinking. Furthermore, in The Netherlands, we have reached a juncture where political parties, and especially our Christian democratic political parties, have made a tremendous nationalist and conservative move to the right, something that I am very critical of. So, I am suspicious that a *Theoloog des Vaderlands* (see note 16), with the emphasis on this 'mother/fatherland' in the title, will be part of this nationalist and populist turn, especially because the publication date of the book is 2017. At the same time, I am intrigued, not least by the sub-heading, which refers to *white* Dutchmen. I have followed, informed by black and white controversies in South Africa, the heated Dutch discussions about *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) and the 'white rage' (Anderson, 2016) that often accompanies the debate. It strikes me that this (white) anger is often set in a cultural discourse reminiscent of apartheid South Africa, where every 'tribe' had its own culture in order to distinguish 'them' from 'us' and to legitimise hierarchical segregation of the various 'tribes' and 'cultures' in segregated 'homelands' or 'Bantustans' (South African History Online 2017). In fact, this cultural discourse has even allowed white Dutch people to break the law and halt anti-Black Pete protesters on their way to a demonstration on a public highway in November 2017, prompting the Minister of Home

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Affairs, Kajsa Ollongren, to call for ‘understanding’ regarding the actions and emotions of the offenders (NU.nl, 2018).

But I digress. Back home and to Janneke Stegeman’s book, which I started browsing. Before long it had grabbed and absorbed me in such a way that I read all 61 pages in just one day. The text amazed me and resonated with so many things that I had been thinking about over the last couple of years, the very things that had led me away from reading any theological literature. Here, my own academic, intellectual, and for what it is worth, theological thinking merged for the first time in many years. This was not because this type of literature had not previously been available, but rather was a result of my passiveness or earlier disillusionment, which resulted in not looking for it properly anymore and jumping to the conclusion that my analysis was right – that it was no longer worth looking for critical religious literature as it was not to be found.

Returning, again, to Janneke Stegeman’s short, but powerful book, she writes: “Palestina als bron van transformatie: Het einde van mijn ‘neutraliteit’. Aan Palestina heb ik veel te danken” (2017:38).<sup>18</sup> Basically, if I swap the word ‘Palestine’ for ‘South Africa’, it could be my text: My research in South and southern Africa informs and guides my becomings.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many more texts in Stegeman’s book could have been written by me, based on my biography and development. She writes: “Zodra ik mijn vooringenomenheid eenmaal op het spoor was, kon ik niet meer doen alsof ik in mijn eigen land opeens wel weer een neutraal en contextloos mens was” (Stegeman, 2017:41).<sup>20</sup> It was my experiences in southern Africa that opened my eyes and positioned me in the Black Pete discussions in The Netherlands. Touring with my African-American colleagues from University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) through South Africa opened my eyes to the global interconnectedness of racism. I was moved to tears when, in this context, one of these UCLA colleagues gave me a signed copy of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ (2015) powerful narrative about the lives of African-

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18 My own translation: ‘Palestine as source of transformation: The end of my ‘neutrality’. I have much to thank Palestine for’.

19 Not what I *have become* because I do not refer to ‘becoming’ as some sort of ‘point in my live or career’, but as a Deleuzian process of ongoing and multiple becomings.

20 My own translation: ‘As soon as I became aware of my bias, I could no longer pretend to be a neutral and contextless person in my own country’.

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Americans through American history, *Between the world and me*, and signed it with his name, and realised, as never before, that neither his first, nor his last name were his own African name! In the mould of American history he had been made into a Black Pete, whose own and original name would be of no importance to him or us, it is just 'black'. It makes one understand why a black person, with his or her authentic name, is often rendered a representative for *all* black people by the (white) people in power and privilege, and why a white name does not have this effect: In identity politics, having your authentic name or not makes the difference between a (powerful) person-with-individual-agency-and-belonging and a (far less powerful) representative-of-a-collective-with-no-specified-location (Patel, 2013; see also Pallson, 2014).

Stegeman also writes about the relation between whiteness and privilege (2017:9) and argues that “de interessantste vragen worden niet gesteld door de mensen die er comfortabel bij zitten. De noodzakelijke, lastige vragen komen op waar het schuurt” (Ibid.:16),<sup>21</sup> acknowledging that, as a white, heterosexual woman, she is not part of those margins, but rather part of the privileged centre of power. It brings her to the conclusion that she cannot be “*het tegengeluid*”<sup>22</sup> (Ibid.:19), she can only be the “*dwarse stem*”<sup>23</sup> (Ibid.) within the centres of privileged power. These are formulations that make me think again about the choices I recently made (together with Frans Kamsteeg) in the context of my own possible contributions to the heated debates in South Africa on social justice and transformation: Maybe as an older, white man from The Netherlands, I should just be silent and leave the talking in and about South Africa to more relevant, younger, and more marginal people than myself, following what Samantha Vice (2010) suggested in her fiercely critiqued and discussed article ‘How do I live in this strange place?’: Yes, you’re white and privileged, so be humble and be quiet for once. When we spoke of our intended silence at the Bloemfontein conference, it caused some confusion in the audience, but also sympathy from a few of our South African colleagues. Someone even said it was courageous of us to argue for silence, but why, then, write here about it again? Why not keep our promise and remain quiet? Is this

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21 My own translation: ‘the interesting questions are not posed by the people who are sitting comfortably. The necessary, troublesome questions arise where it chafes’.

22 My own translation: ‘the riposte’.

23 My own translation: ‘renegade voice’.

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a breach of the silence we promised? Is there a difference between literally being silent and not speaking, but still writing about it? Is this hypocritical? Or could it even be considered cowardice on our side, as through writing you avoid the heat of a verbal exchange?

One could argue that it is no coincidence that Stegeman's book resonated so strongly with me. It was a book that was waiting for me to read it. It can be argued that Stegeman and I share aspects of our biographies, although we don't know each other or have never spoken to or seen each other before. We share being Dutch, white, privileged, our *alma mater*, VU, where we both did our PhD, a strong background in Protestantism and a confrontation with gross post-colonial social injustices in other countries, Palestine for Stegeman and South Africa for me, which have informed and maybe even directed our thinking about our own religious traditions and our own positions and complicities. If my late mother (she passed away in 2009) was here to see me write this text, she would no doubt remind me, that 'God works in mysterious ways, but certainly has a plan with you that you cannot escape or avoid'. And yes, there was a time when I was convinced of a 'divine calling' to become a missionary, but that was a long time ago.

But how does this relate to the beginning of this vignette, where I boasted about my 'authority'? I think that, auto-ethnographically speaking, my explicitness about my religious self is symbolically represented in the quotation marks that I use around the word 'authority'. In terms of a Protestant ethic, modesty, humbleness and especially humility are considered central virtues (Cooper, 2013); you are expected not to think too highly or too proudly of yourself – it is all by the grace of God that you are allowed and able to do the work 'you are meant to do'. No matter how secular my discourse, my academic writing and teaching, my state of mind, is saturated with convictions and takes on a life that is probably deeply rooted in the religious traditions I was raised and participated in till my mid-twenties. Thus, I would never dare to write about my 'authority' without the quotation marks. It might explain why Samantha Vice (2010), arguing for whites to keep silent for a while, to show humility instead of a (loud) voice in the debates in and about transformation and diversity in South African higher education, appeals to me, it fits a discourse of a certain Protestant ethic. It took me a while to understand and be able to rationally argue why I want to act on the suggestions in Vice's (2010)

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article. This vignette is testimony to and outcome of that process. Through auto-ethnography, I have attempted to shed analytical light on some of the intersectionalities in my life to this point, where my religious upbringing is not only intersecting with ‘professional authority’, but also with for instance ‘whiteness’, ‘white privilege’, ‘comfort’, ‘political awareness’, ‘biography’, ‘VU’ and ‘South Africa’. Exploring these intersectionalities also feels like reconciling (some of) my religious experiences in earlier life and my later experiences in academia. From here on, and true to Samantha Vice, I will remain silent, or, at most, I will utter falteringly.

### WHITENESS AND ENGAGEMENT: WHAT IS THERE LEFT TO SAY, OR ‘SO WHAT’?

The above may seem narcissist, reflecting on our little selves. Or is there more merit in such an undertaking? Is there a conclusion to be drawn from our three individual vignettes that not only differ in the selective biographies they (re) present, but also in the consequences and the courses of action we choose to take in our personal and professional lives? While these are valid rhetorical questions, we think with Yancy (2005) that there is more to them. We contend that it is part of white privilege to give in to the luxury of ‘taking time to get [our] shit together’, to re-inscribe distance by reflecting on our position, and perhaps even to re-centre whiteness (2005:229) by writing this chapter.

Ida feels she can quote John van Maanen as a substantiation and legitimation for the intersectionality between her academic and activist life: “The entire point of the ethnography – from beginning to end – is to take on certain evils in the world, show what they have done (and are doing) and tell us what might be done about them” (Van Maanen, 2010:250). She believes that the ‘confessional tale’ (Van Maanen, 2010), auto-reflection, withdrawal and deciding to ‘keep silent’ is not enough, or even counterproductive (cf. Keet, 2011 in note 2). She therefore opts for a tale of advocacy and protest in the form of activist engagement, born from the autobiographic experience that oppression and exclusion keep people apart on all levels. That is to say, fighting one issue helps other issues to fade, and endangering the totality of desired change. Merely addressing whiteness does not help change hegemonic masculinity – as addressing sexism did not help in fighting racism. We must be active and sensitive on all levels, inwardly directed (reflective and perhaps confessional),

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but embracing action and advocacy on the outside – cutting out safe spaces and times. In this way, she may experience what it means to exert engaged ethnography – indeed, outside her comfort zones, but with a goal of change and making a difference, until the next wave presents itself. Frans and Harry also look for ‘support’ from John van Maanen, and even from the same publication that Ida refers to, in the sense that they take seriously his advice, to thoroughly contextualise ethnographic findings from all angles: “[...] ethnographers must broaden their reach and refuse to reduce ethnography to representation of perspectives or mentalities that are not contextualised by, for example, class, race, gender, and political-economic conditions” (Ibid.:247). Both accept the consequences of their institution’s complicity in the South African higher education predicament. As they see it, their personal and institutional biographies oblige them to take a clearly less vociferous position. Although they do not quite live up to the promise made in their public presentation at the Bloemfontein conference to keep silent for a while, their ‘whispered’ confessional tales (Van Maanen, 2010) are deliberately meant as low key contributions, in line with Latour’s and Coates’s warning against good intentions.

All three of us can thus look for ‘academic cover’ and ‘legitimation’ under the wings of Van Maanen’s (2010) argument that researchers use narratives or stories to show their engagement and express their positionality, in order to reach some kind of deeper, layered reflection. No matter how the three of us and our biographies differ, it is no coincidence that we have ended up together, that we stick together, and that we are publishing this chapter together. All three of us continue our research into these themes in South Africa and consider ourselves as academics, intellectuals and teachers, responsible for sharing these ongoing reflections and positionings, e.g. with our students in our classrooms at the VU in The Netherlands. Maybe not as activist as Ida demands, but also not as silent and withdrawn as Frans and Harry would have it. Nonetheless, the work is ongoing, because we believe it important to share our inner musings with the next generation of students that we interact with. Thus, our research and teaching explores, articulates and expresses what whiteness means in our respective countries, and how this works out, or not, on individual levels. As a result, our whiteness/white privilege is not left silent and hidden. Moreover, it helps uncover how the intertwined histories of our countries and institutions silently but persistently influence hegemonic debates in and about higher education (cf. Tate & Page, 2018:145).

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This is all the more important as universities are among the places and spaces where traditional structures, the status quo, and cultures of times gone by are conserved and transferred between generations, enabling or disabling future power relations in diversity. What is left to say is that our three vignettes may share various degrees of confusion, and the conviction that every instance of speaking out on whiteness is problematic and uncomfortable. However, bringing our different shades of engagement into the open (in this text) keeps us aware of the complicated but undeniable responsibilities we have ‘as white academics’ in the anti-racism struggle.

Maybe we can again analogously use Latour’s (2017) argument about the impossibility of hoping to ever be able to ‘repair’ our climate, as our planet is not a giant ‘engine’ that can be ‘reengineered’ to make it ‘work’ again. And let Latour speak to Coates’ (2017) refusal to preach hope for improved race relations in the US, and argue that maybe the same applies to issues and processes around whiteness, white privilege, and diversity in higher education in Dutch-South African research cooperation. There is little reason for hope; there is no ‘repair’, nothing can be ‘undone’. Yet, together we must persevere, not give up and live and act for the better, embedded in our various degrees of unhappiness and despair. Whether we do this through faltering, whispering or protesting, our tales should avoid at all cost any self-righteousness about our good intentions, but reflect in auto-ethnographic accounts that deconstruct our own conditions of whiteness in all consequences. Rather than making confessions and demanding penance, these accounts aim to acknowledge and display the normalcy of our systematic complicity of exercising privilege based on the condition of white supremacy. Then, dialogue, however painful and cumbersome is not the result, but the starting point to, firstly, not make the same myopic mistakes again, and secondly, build a critical mass for deconstructing the structural and institutional conditions feeding into the maintenance of injustice and divisions.

This might be a state of mind to escape the risk of being ‘ambushed’ (Yancy, 2005:230-232) by whiteness – and face the consequences of dismantling whiteness as a continuous, embodied, necessary, and never-ending project. Our different grades of confused states of mind may function as fertile ground for providing some of the sensitivities and ‘boundary-pushing-empathy’ (see Krznaric, 2014) to at least recognise and acknowledge social injustices and the



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pain of others in these processes. In that sense, the narratives in this chapter, as in other chapters of this book, stand for the mutual support we all need in our ongoing Confrontations<sup>24</sup> with the violence and fundamental injustices that research on higher education in South Africa inevitably raise.

Reviewing our ‘confessional tales’, and acknowledging the comments by the reviewers, it was Barbara Applebaum’s contribution to the Oxford Encyclopedia of Education, titled ‘Critical Whiteness Studies’ (2016), which has helped in the formulation of an answer to the challenging questions about our vignettes: **so what?** Applebaum uses Mill’s concept of ‘epistemology of ignorance’ to stress the importance of disclosing vested interest in not knowing and the denial of complicity (2016:11, 12). This is perhaps the true mask of white privilege and supremacy, that is often hidden behind the defensive cloak of what DiAngelo calls ‘white fragility’ (2011, 2016). Consequently, and in line with Coates’ radical perspective and South African Melissa Steyn’s plea to ‘rearticulate whiteness’ (2001:168), unveiling the interested ignorance of our institutional complicity in the continuation of a culture of whiteness – as we have tried to do in our vignettes – might be a viable way to move beyond the white privilege pedagogy that “begins but also ends with the demand for confession” (Applebaum 2016:8). The autoethnographic journey undertaken in these vignettes is an attempt at vigilance, “that continuous effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being” (Ibid.:14). Yet we also acknowledge DiAngelo’s caution, that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2016:6; after a collection of poems by Audre Lorde). Therefore, any effort to dismantle the normalcy of whiteness – or ‘whiteness’ as Tate and Page (2018) have it – by Dutch white scholars risks to remain powerless. Nevertheless, we should try, although hypocrisy requires that this attempt does not sound too loudly.

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24 As we revised this chapter, a new post by Sara Ahmed (2018) appeared titled ‘Confrontation?’ – and it parallels our argument about ongoing confrontation, attentiveness and perseverance.

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