

White: a colour like any other

Address by Sunny Bergman (excerpt)

'A sub-equatorial child is usually just a beggar.' We played the record that contains this line from the theme song of the 1980s Dutch *Children for Children* charity project until it wore out, and its message to children was clear: African children are to be pitied and are dependent on the goodness of our hearts. Growing up with the well-known images of black children with swollen starvation bellies and flies crawling in their eyes might lead one to think that begging children are 'the reality' in equatorial countries, whereas they are merely exceptions of course.

Another example: at home we enjoyed reading the adventures of Pippi Longstocking, whose father, a shipwrecked sailor, was stranded on Kurrekurredudd Isle, where he became the 'fat white chief'. So, a white man washes ashore on a tropical island full of 'natives' wearing hula hula skirts and automatically becomes their leader.

As Daniel Kehlman has argued in his address, cultural messages consciously or subconsciously reflect the zeitgeist. So, what are the images that we, you and I, grew up with? And how do they shape our worldview? Often they are too transparent to be noticed at the time. People look right through them, as it were. From a distance, however, as our perspective shifts, we see something new, something true. Distance in time, the historical perspective which Kehlmann adopted when studying *The Wizard of Oz*, can restore their visibility. Thus, in films, music and books we are able to expose prejudices and undercurrents that remained invisible to contemporaries. I am surprised *today* that my parents did not see *then* how problematic the *Children for Children* song and Lindgren's 'fat white chief' were. After all, the racism and Eurocentric perspective are so obvious! Still, even today, it remains difficult to face up to our own blind spots.

If I asked you: 'How does it feel to be white?' What would you think? Would you think the question was odd? Would you think: 'White? I'm not white, I'm fair-skinned!'

Lately I have been asking people this question. One man replied aptly: 'My skin colour is as ordinary as water running from a tap.'

Until recently, I never gave any thought to the fact that I belong to an ethnic group. Ethnic minorities, they are other people. I thought that my identity was formed by factors such as my tastes, political orientation, personal history, gender and my parents. Skin colour is not on that list.

In response to my question, my stepfather said: 'I'm just white. And anything that just *is* tends to move to the edge of your consciousness.'

But of course nothing is neutral or just *is*. Words are not neutral either. While the term 'white' seems innocent to most of us, the word has a colonial history; it stood for not having any colour, for being pure and immaculate. Together with the n-word, it was born of our colonial past. The n-word was used to dehumanize people into merchandise; it was how we denoted enslaved Africans. As such, there is nothing neutral about the Dutch word 'blank' (*meaning of pure and immaculate skin*) when compared with the n-word. That is why I use the terms black and white.

In recent years, since my public denouncement of the Dutch Black Peter (*Zwarte Piet*) tradition in particular and racism in general, I have met many angry white people. I have received hate mails and even death threats, allegedly for being a 'traitor' to 'my own race'.

Even people in my own circle of left-leaning, well-educated intellectuals often become angry or dismissive whenever racism and mechanisms of exclusion are discussed. They tend to feel attacked: 'But surely I am not a racist, am I?'

For this reason, my aim is to look at myself and my white group, asking the question: how problematic is being white? And where does the anger and indignation among white people come from whenever racism is addressed? And how does the analysis that racism is structural and being white is therefore profitable in this society get construed into a personal accusation?

To establish the extent to which white superiority is imprinted from an early age, I conducted an experiment in which children around five years old answer questions about a white and a black baby doll or about cartoon figures. This black doll/white doll experiment has been performed in other countries before, but never in the Netherlands. My experiment does not pretend to be academic in any way; there was no control group and the sample size was too small. Still, the outcomes are telling and provide food for thought. We invited thirty children, twenty-two of whom were white and 8 of whom were dark-skinned. I asked the children which doll or cartoon figure was the smartest. Around 75 percent of the children who answered the question pointed to the white doll. 'Because she is white', was a comment, and: 'because this doll has a normal colour'. When I asked which doll was naughty or would be punished, almost 80 percent of the children pointed to the black doll. 'That one looks a bit angry!', said one of them. And: 'This baby is naughty because he pulls your hair'. And when asked which doll most people would see as the prettiest, 25 out of 30 children, so almost 85 percent, pointed to the white doll. There was no significant difference in these percentages between the white and the dark-skinned children. The parents were watching the experiment and were often shocked. A vast majority (90%) indicated that they were politically left-leaning and not people who would explicitly or consciously practice racism. Desperately, they asked themselves where their children might have picked up these valuations.

The young children who participated in our experiment hold up a mirror to us: from their associative responses, we can see how society imposes a colour hierarchy. After all, young children have not yet learnt to give socially desirable answers.

On a conscious level, people in progressive circles teach their children that racism is wrong and that we must not judge people by the colour of their skin, that colour does not matter. But it does. Because our world history is consistently described from a Western, white, Eurocentric perspective, we now consider this view to be a neutral, objective view. But this white-centric view is of course also coloured.

The notion that white is neutral, objective and the starting point of everything is one of the most detrimental and defining aspects of whiteness.

The white perspective is neither neutral nor objective. It is as coloured as any other. If we, white people, accept that we have all, to a varying degree, been socialized with implicit white superiority, we will be able to develop a more civilized consciousness of this. We need not let ourselves be paralyzed by collective guilt, but we do need to assume responsibility for our discriminatory behaviour.

Our self-image will not implode from being corrected, and Being open to concrete feedback such as 'could you refrain from using the n-word in future?' does not mean we are bad people. If we allow our personal morality to depend on this, we make it very difficult for those who experience discrimination to put it on the agenda. However, if we succeed in listening to feedback, in all openness and without defensive reflexes, we can change our behaviour so that we may ultimately achieve an equal society.