

ILLUSTRATING WHITENESS: A STUDY OF WHITE INNOCENCE IN DUTCH CHILDREN'S BOOKS



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no one is born hating another person because of the colour of her skin, or her background or her religion. People learn to hate, and, if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite
- nelson mandela

you must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right
- rosa parks

this thesis is for all those who can envision a society free of hate and discrimination.

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Introduction

To the rest of Europe the Netherlands positions itself as a country of liberal, socialist values, willing to stand on the right side of history and effect positive social change. The Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalise gay marriage in 2001, and the official line on the government's website offers positive rhetoric surrounding gender, with a particular emphasis on promoting equal opportunities for men and women in the labour force, to allow for better equity in the distribution of responsibilities in the private sphere for men and women¹. However, despite the claims there is a lot more to be examined as it seems these policies and principles are not practiced effectively at an 'everyday' level in society. The Netherlands is not normally on the agenda for black rights activism, or high on the list as an academic topic on a worldwide scale, with places like the USA receiving much more attention surrounding structural inequality and race issues. This thesis affirms both Wekker and Essed to argue that the Netherlands has much further to go to address its inherent racial inequalities.

The Dutch case is unusual: one, because of the fact that due to its colonial past there are many first generation immigrants living in the Netherlands as opposed to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom where immigrants have lived and worked for many generations (Essed 1991, 2); two, because it is generally perceived to be a country where tolerance and liberalism is the predominant assumed basis for policy (Essed 1991, viiii); and three, because of the vociferous, sometimes aggressive denial of race or gender being factors of continued structural inequality by white Dutch people, while paradoxically preaching a non-racist agenda (Wekker 2016).

Innocence, Wekker argues, is one of the key facets of Dutch society. She describes innocence in the Dutch context being made up of the following: firstly, the idea of the innocence in Christianity that is heralded as the foundation of Dutch values; secondly, the Netherlands as a small nation, metaphorically childlike and thus perceived as innocent; third, it conjures up sexist ideas of innocence of the weak feminine that are projected onto the country; and fourth, the innocence that can be proclaimed as a kind of justification to utter racist jokes, without repercussion. "Innocence in other words, thickly describes part of a dominant Dutch way of being in the world. The claim of innocence, however, is a double-edged sword: it contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know, capturing what philosopher Charles W. Mills (1997-2007) has described as the epistemology of ignorance." (Wekker 2016, 17). As Wekker explains, white Dutch people operate within this epistemology of ignorance that allows them/us to fail to understand the racism of the world we live in while still benefiting from our position within racist structures.

This thesis argues the construction of white identity is reinforced through the above values of white innocence specific to the Netherlands that are passed from (white) parent/teacher to (white)

¹ See: <https://www.government.nl/topics/family-law/same-sex-marriage> for government statistics on this.

child. I argue one of the ways white innocence subconsciously pervades Dutch society is through Dutch children's books. Through an over-saturation of white narratives and white perspectives that have an assumed universal appeal they become one apparatus that embeds the view that white is the default race. Cultural images, including ones in children's picture books are a reflection of the conceptual and cultural paradigm and help reaffirm and uphold dominant societal views of the time. If those views are laden with subversive messages that code some bodies as having more value than others, this is subconsciously internalised and reproduced throughout the child's adolescence (and later adulthood) (hooks 2015, 60). The images children see through children's books pose a vision of society that places the white (usually male) figure as their key point of reference, to which they must always aspire. They can also uphold stereotyped images, such as outdated colonial gendered depictions of black men as savages, women as hyper-sexualised and both convivial but dumb beings². hooks develops how this has had negative consequences for black women in particular as not only racist, but sexist ideologies developed that dehumanised black women to the point they were considered subhuman (hooks 2015, 71). This thesis does not claim to analyse the extent of the impact these books and images have on the child (white or not) but rather conclude that they do have some impact. And if we can conclude (potentially negative) messages in children's books can perpetuate (negative) attitudes towards blackness in Dutch people, so too, can children's books reverse that. Ultimately, children are the key to a non-racist future. Whites must take responsibility for ending the cycle of repeating colour-blind attitudes that embed white innocence in Dutch society. If children's books are an expressive, artistic tool that can address large issues and concepts in an accessible way, they have the potential for reversing the inherited white innocence that is pervasive in Dutch society. This is the foundation for my thesis, within which I will propose that children's picture books have the potential for deconstructing some of these narratives of white innocence and literally and figuratively illustrating whiteness as a raced position.

I will be using Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence* as the theoretical framework for this study. Her lived experience of the minutiae of micro-aggressions and prejudices faced living and working in the Netherlands as a black woman are valuable to my thesis, as they evidence something that I have not had to experience as a white, British, able-bodied cis woman. With this research I do not aim to prove that racism exists in the Netherlands, I will take her text as proof that it operates in the Dutch context and I will conduct my own study from within this theoretical framework.

Key Terms: Whiteness, White Privilege and Race

Whiteness is used here to describe the position of structural advantage whereby white people benefit from a racist structure of society purely by fact of their skin colour. It does not mean to suggest that

² A classic example here would be Zwarte Piet.

white people do not have hard lives, but that their skin colour is not one of the things making it harder (Frankenberg 1993, 1; Dyer 1997, xiv; DiAngelo 2011, 56). Simply, it is the notion that you already belong (Wise 2011, 10). Calling this whiteness is necessary because it makes it more difficult for white people to absolve responsibility from the role they play.

White Innocence in the Dutch context, as explained above, is the idea that racist attitudes exist within a paradox of a supposed liberal and tolerant country. It argues racist sentiments are in some way concealed through a maintenance of innocence in Dutch society (Wekker 2016).

Colour-blindness is the idea behind Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists* (2007). It suggests that the racism of the Jim Crow³ era is behind us but there is a new facet of racism that has emerged, one that is concealed by the idea that we now do not see colour, which preaches a denial of holding racist attitudes while simultaneously reinforcing racist views.⁴ It is the act of whites using semantic devices such as "I'm not a racist, but..." that allows them blame minorities for their position in society. Thus, they can avoid deeper discussions about race (that may challenge their views) by avoiding the subject altogether and claiming everyone is equal (Bonilla-Silva 2007, 49).

Whitewashing was a term originally coined to explain the trend in the media, (particularly Hollywood), for their tendency to portray and glorify white scripts using white (or light-skinned) actors and appealing to a target white audience. I use it in my thesis in much the same sense but with particular reference to Dutch children's books.

In this thesis, *race* is understood as a socially constructed shifting category. It is relevant as a classification here as it the category has thus far worked in favour of one group (whites) over others (non-whites). The thesis maintains that white is also a raced position but has sometimes not defined it as such purely in an attempt to elucidate succinctly how society currently views white as outside of the category of race.

Importantly, I use the terms *white* and *black* in the same way Wekker does, as political and cultural concepts not as binary biological categories (Wekker 2016, 24). Also I recognise the problematic nature of using the term 'non-white' to describe other ethnicities, and have tried to avoid using it where possible. However, I do add a caveat here to say, I use 'non-white' on occasion because it is the quickest way to communicate when I am talking about the way whiteness specifically excludes those who are not white.

It is a common trend in Holland to describe a school as either a *black school* or *white school* depending on the ratio of white to non-white students. Despite the problematic nature of these terms it is how the interviewees described their institutions and for ease I have done the same.

³ The Jim Crow era was a racist ideology that permeated the Southern states of the USA lasting from late 1800's until the civil rights era. They became more than a set of laws and kept blacks segregated and dehumanised.

⁴ See Bonilla-Silva (2007) for extensive qualitative analysis of colour-blind racism in the US.

Finally, when I say *children's literature* I am referring to picture books. Picture books involve a combination of pictures and text where pictures make up at least half of the reading experience, if not more. They are widely recognised to be targeted at children aged 4-9 but age ranges are largely subjective and I argue that children of all ages can enjoy and learn from picture books: pictures are a form of communication open to a myriad of interpretations.

Data Sources and Methodology

Primary research for this thesis uses the results of semi-structured interviews as its methodological framework. Interviews in Group 1 were conducted with six white, female, primary school teachers that all work or have worked in Dutch primary schools in Utrecht. Due to the size of the sample it is impossible to generalise across the Netherlands as a whole, but I identify three common themes: 1) religious tolerance masquerading as racial acceptance; 2) a 'not our problem' outlook when it comes to matters of racism; and, 3) a general misunderstanding and lack of awareness of how whiteness operates or how it should be held accountable. I call this white invisibility. Interviews in Group 2 were conducted with one white-British secondary school teacher, currently teaching in the Netherlands, and the other was a focus group with two Dutch women, one white and one black, working at a local pre-school.

Secondary research is used to illustrate the current racialised and gendered split of Dutch children's books available at Utrecht Public library. The method of content analysis is used to provide data on how many books include diverse characters, how many use all-white narratives, and the split of male and female leads. This is intended to illustrate the landscape of Dutch children's literature in Utrecht.

Both methodological devices are used in conjunction with Wekker's main arguments surrounding white innocence in the Netherlands, and are used to affirm the view that white innocence operates in a subtle but pervasive nature, that is both denied and defended in the Dutch context.

Positionality

In discussing Dutch racism as a white, non-Dutch person, it is necessary to position myself within the debate. As a white woman I have chosen to focus on the way whiteness is presented, absorbed and reified in the Dutch imaginary. Discussing racism from within a context of whiteness is something I feel comfortable doing, as this is where my lived experiences lie. Importantly, when discussing the lived experiences and feelings of black women, I have used the writings of black women to avoid speaking from a position from which I have no authority. I try to live by an anti-racist agenda every day but I recognise we are all agents of racism and thus it is an active and continual unlearning process. Whites must try to not get caught in unproductive feelings of guilt, and instead must take responsibility for being part of the racist structure of society (Dyer 1997, 7). Throughout this study I have tried to

remain acutely aware of my own privilege and how I carry it, and in a sense how I can use the position of my privileged status as white to effect some change.

I believe there is a delicate balance between more white people producing work on racism in an already over-saturated white academic sphere, and white people actively calling-out other whites on their racism. It is important to be conscious of taking space away from people of colour. It is not something I take lightly and would always encourage to first and foremost listen to those who have experienced racism. The position I will maintain throughout this thesis is that most importantly, open and honest discussions need to be had if racism is to be exposed and ultimately eradicated. Of course this is not always possible as these discussions are not always horizontal, due to the very nature of the racist structure of society there is always a power imbalance (Eddo-Lodge 2017, xii). As someone who has had to gradually learn of the privilege that comes with being white, I can recognise the position that the white women I interview find themselves in and I hope this brings some authenticity to what can be a subjective mode of research. In trying to navigate this terrain, I hope to do it some justice and provide a new perspective on diversity in children's literature.

The Structure of the Thesis

Part I lays out the methodological research that was conducted. It outlines the caveats of interviewing as a methodology and then takes the results from Group 1 to find out if primary learning in the Netherlands supports a diverse range of authors and texts. The questions I asked were primarily to discover what materials were used with the children in the classroom, how many children of colour were present in each class, whether race is something that is ever addressed or discussed and how important they felt a discussion of race was. While some schools showed a greater propensity and awareness of the need for diverse narratives, the respondents confirmed that a white perspective in children's literature was the norm. I conclude that there was very little correlation between schools that used white learning materials and evidence of white innocence in operation, but that in fact all displayed answers that work to embed white innocence.

Part II ties together the interview results from both groups with a deeper understanding of whiteness, using Gloria Wekker's argument alongside other scholars. When analysing the results of the interviews, I utilise Bonilla-Silva's (2007) semantic devices to highlight the ways in which Dutch primary school teachers subconsciously reinforce a colour-blind agenda. From the responses, all white respondents demonstrated a lack of understanding of structural and systemic racism, a denial of how it might operate in their institution, without deconstructing the privilege their white skin grants them. This section also offers some insight into the gendered aspect of racism using the work of bell hooks and Audré Lorde, and will also bring in research conducted on the statistics of the current representation of people of colour in Utrecht Public Library.

As the field of Gender Studies is interdisciplinary, Part III utilises the field of Critical Children's Literature Studies to help conclude that children's literature has an affect on the child. It cements my argument for the necessity of not only positive and varied representations of women of colour in children's literature, but also offers the potential children's books have to educate white children about their whiteness in a non-threatening way. It proposes children's literature as one way to open-up the conversation on race in the Netherlands, without guilt, or shame and hopefully break the cycle of perpetual white innocence and ignorance.

In conclusion, this thesis affirms the view that whiteness is a state of being and structurally located as a position that many white people in the Netherlands do not recognise or deconstruct, and as such is deemed the default Dutch identity. Nancy Jouwe states the Netherlands suffers from aphasia, that is, a loss of ability to understand or express speech, when it comes to racism (Jouwe, 8-01-2018). This is particularly relevant to the white position and is demonstrated from the responses gathered from the qualitative data collected. It is important that children of colour see themselves reflected in positive ways in stories, in the classroom and in society. If the images of blackness children see are rooted in remnants from a colonial era, their view of blackness will be tied-up in outdated negative colonial imagery. White children too, should be taught of white privilege at a young age. My research concludes that children can be active agents of racist and non-racist behaviour depending on external surroundings. As babies they are young enough to have no pre-conceived conceptions of blackness or whiteness as coded by society. I argue that if we target children's books to help prompt discussions of deconstructing whiteness and making white privilege visible, we can teach children early on about racial inequality, and in doing so we can begin to unlearn some of our own pre-conceived notions about race.

Part I

Interview Data: White as a Raced Position

This chapter describes in-depth the methodological research method, the caveats and pitfalls to the method of interviewing as a methodology and analyses the results collected using Wekker's concept of white innocence as the central frame. It discusses how the results help to demonstrate white innocence and colour-blind racism in the Netherlands.

Data Collected: Group 1

The data from this study was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. The first set of interviews were conducted with six primary school teachers who had taught or were teaching at least one primary class in the Netherlands. All were white and female, five were Dutch, one was Danish and the interviews lasted between twenty to forty five minutes. Given that this study is primarily interested in how white people maintain white superiority and perpetuate the view that white is the default race, it was necessary to interview white Dutch people. Because of the identity of the respondents, it is a white, female, middle-class attitude that I focus on in this study. These are considered “good, white Dutch citizens” (Sullivan 2014). By this I mean potentially liberal, left-leaning middle-class women who operate in an ‘everybody is equal’, and ‘we do not see race’ frame, in other words not white-supremacists. The reason I focus on this group is that it is these circles where racism is the most vehemently disavowed and where discussion of race is addressed only reluctantly, if at all. In wanting to appear as a “good” white person, the middle-class woman is determined to circumvent the subject of race for fear of saying the wrong thing, or creating awkwardness, therefore it is avoided wherever possible (Sullivan 2014, 91). In doing so white women can ignore the systemic prejudices that have allowed them to progress at the expense of black women, and remain ignorant about the racist structures of society. Additionally, I wanted to interview those who had influence over children’s learning. This thesis contends that children are agents of their socio-political structure. Therefore primary schools and teachers are key sites that can influence the child’s (racial) development.

I refer to the interviewees from Group 1 as Respondent A - F (see Table 1 below). Respondents A, E and F taught in ‘white schools’. Respondents B, C and D taught in ‘black schools’. They described the makeup of their class as having a minority of white pupils. Respondents B, C and D claimed to use a set of diverse materials in the classroom, while A, E and F said they did not.

RESPONDENT	WHITE SCHOOL	BLACK SCHOOL	DIVERSE MATERIALS
A	YES		DON'T USE
B		YES	USE
C		YES	USE
D		YES	USE
E	YES		DON'T USE
F	YES		DON'T USE

Table 1: first interview sample - primary school teachers' responses.

I asked ten questions that would help me explore my thesis, and five general questions for respondents to state what school they taught at, how many classes and how long they had been teaching. The main questions were about the ethnic makeup of their classes, whether the respondent was aware of any specific diversity policy in their school and if so, how this was implemented in their own classroom. I then asked what learning materials they used in their classes - for example do they use toys and dolls that aren't white? and whether the literature was written by diverse authors? The second half of the interviews with respondents A-F asked whether they specifically talked about race in their class, and finally whether they ever addressed whiteness⁵. For the first set of interviews, all were conducted over the phone or video-phone. Where Skype or FaceTime was used, it allowed for greater analysis of body language and non-verbal communication.

Data Collected: Group 2

The second set of interviews were more informal and took place face-to-face with a different group of women who worked with children in Holland and elsewhere. I refer to them by names that have been changed to preserve anonymity. Elizabeth was a white British woman who had worked in international schools in Holland at secondary level education, and in South Korea at primary level. This interview lasted for just over one hour. Marike and Naomi are currently working in a pre-school in Utrecht, Holland with children aged 0-4. Naomi is a black Dutch woman, and Marike is a white Dutch woman. This interview took place with both respondents together and lasted for one and a half hours. These questions were much less formal and I encouraged a horizontal discussion, prompting when needed, but also letting the discussion flow naturally. Topics included their respective experiences of growing-up in the Netherlands, the importance of diverse narratives and what whiteness meant to them.

⁵ See appendices for full transcripts of interviews.

Interviews as a Methodology: Caveats

Before I analyse the results, I have laid out some caveats to interviewing as a methodology. Regarding the first set of interviews, the limitations of an all white sample meant that I could not analyse whether this view was consistent among black teachers as well, or whether black teachers take care to make race more of a present subject in the classroom. In this study I try to remain aware of the blindness to of our own privilege that can be found in some white women and take care that I implement intersectional analysis and do not assume all women's experiences as the same. I recognise not all white people are the same, but whiteness itself operates collectively to the detriment of both white and non-white people.

The limitations of phone interviews meant I was unable to pick up on body language and non-verbal communication, and this is a key part of the interview process, especially when discussing a topic like race in the Netherlands. Wekker notes, it is clear that white Dutch people (and white people in general) are not comfortable discussing matters of race (Wekker 2016, 30-32; Sullivan 2014, 85-117). Despite not being face-to-face, I was able to pick up on other aspects that might corroborate this, such as long pauses, stuttering, use of "er" and "erm" or nervous laughter. These semantic devices show awkwardness around a certain topic, and I encountered it in every one of my interviews. When transcribing I specifically chose to record pauses and breaks in sentences so that I could analyse these too and use them in my results.

Finally, there is a language barrier. The interviews were conducted in English, my native language, but the respondent's second or even third language. Therefore some of the pauses or repetition, or grammatical mistakes cannot be put down solely to discomfort with the subject, but also could be attributed to translation. I have tried to take into account the respondent's usual speech pattern established during the interview before analysing any changes when the subject of whiteness was brought up. In some situations I had to help them find the word they were looking for, which could potentially have been influencing their responses. When transcribing I occasionally added in some words to make the sentence structure flow in English; I did not always correct them during the interview but have merely corrected it for the reader. Additionally, when talking about people of colour, all respondents used language generally now considered outdated, such as "coloured", "dark" and "a little bit brown". It felt naïve and offensive in some cases. I could attribute this to language barrier, but I cannot rule out that when speaking Dutch there is less of a taboo surrounding the Dutch word "neger" which translates to negro. In Dutch there are still common words and phrases to describe people of colour that feel out of place, clumsy and offensive in my opinion, when said in English. I have chosen not to note as a racist remark every time a respondent uses the word 'coloured',

but I felt it important to include mention of attitudes towards this type of language in Dutch society⁶. It is telling that the N-word is not considered taboo for Dutch white people in the same way I found growing up in the UK (albeit a white, middle-class area of the UK) and it is telling that the subtleties between saying 'people of colour' and 'coloured people' are not explored in a Dutch context (Sullivan 2014, 96). This might be a reflection of the Netherlands' attitude towards race in general. Some of the questions surrounding race and whiteness may have been challenging for the respondent. As explained, white Dutch people feel uncomfortable discussing race and sometimes I did not push the subject, due to it not being their native language, and being unable to judge their body language. Therefore, some responses are less detailed. I used the questions about representation in children's books as a non-threatening introduction to the race question.

Interviews are a subjective method of analysis and there is inevitably an element of my own judgement in the results. I have attempted to use other scholars' research results to back-up my own as much as possible. Caveats aside, interviews allow a perspective that is personal and offer a richness of analysis gathered from lived experience.

The interviews began as a way to find out if the materials used in Dutch primary classrooms were majority white-centric. I discovered that in nearly all classrooms they were, but instead, what they actually revealed was the use of semantic colour-blind techniques to describe racism and multiculturalism in the classroom by the teachers interviewed. The following section goes on to describe the themes I identified from the interviews, and how each one solidifies an attitude of white innocence in the white female middle-classes, one that is ultimately embedding ignorance about racial structures that work to place one group above another, while disguised as non-racist and good (Wekker 2016; Sullivan 2014, 86). In the following chapters I use this as the basis to argue that one way to start to combat white innocence (read: ignorance) is offering children's books as a way to help white parents and teachers of white children to start a discussion of race at a young age.

Theme 1: Religious Tolerance as Racial Acceptance

There was often a noticeable overlap of religion, culture and race. In four of the six schools, religious tolerance was used as synonymous with race. When asked: "Are you aware of any diversity practices at your school?"; and, "Do you ever explicitly talk about race in your class?", celebration of cultural and religious holidays were offered as examples of discussions on race. Celebrating Muslim, Turkish and Jewish cultural holidays in the class was an attempt at cultural exchange. Respondent's A-D, representing three black schools and one white school gave examples:

⁶ See also Bonilla-Silva's chapter '*The Style of Colour-Blindness: How to Talk Nasty About Minorities Without Sounding Racist*' (2007, pp. 53-74).

Yeah, we do have that sort of thing but its called *cultureminu* which means cultural menu I think, if you just translate it. Erm, and that brings you to other people's religions...or it brings you to just "What's the Hague like? What can we learn about our own city?" And then...we go to the *musea*,...if you know all parts of the Hague, if you know the people of the Hague, if you know the music from the Hague. That's what we have done this year, but it can bring us to a project like other religions [Respondent A].

I don't think we really have a policy about it but we have a lot of - well not a lot - but we have some Muslim children as well in the school, so we do talk about the - I don't know what it is in English - but the *Sacrifaice* - yeah - all these traditional er, things they do... [Respondent B].

We don't have er, a real policy, but we talk about it a lot. And for example...we celebrate the carnival, we talk about carnival and Ramadan, so it's almost similar to do [these] kind of things. And when somebody in the family is getting married we talk about how we celebrate it the Islamic way, or something [Respondent D].

We have the er, Ramadan - I don't know how it's called in English - but they end with a party. Sugar party in Dutch, I know that we celebrate that at school. So we, er, we don't only have Christmas parties but we also have Sugar parties for the Islamic children. Parents are coming at school and we show a little video of what is it, and why, and we discuss about it [Respondent C].

Implementing class discussion of religious cultural celebrations was explained by respondents as a positive step, and one that showed their school was successfully multicultural. When pressed for an example of discussion of race explicitly within the class however, nothing concrete was provided. What some answers in fact suggest, is a religious *tolerance* and not an acceptance, and does not extend much past celebrating the *Sugarfest*. On the surface this appears as an appreciation, an attempted understanding of the students' cultural backgrounds. However, the problem with these responses is twofold. First, it exposes a "cultural tourism" (Sullivan 2014, 98) that trivialises other cultures and appropriates certain appealing aspects in the spirit of entertainment. Secondly, this surface acceptance does not extend much deeper than a tolerance for the festivities rather than a true attempt at interacting with the cultures themselves (Wekker 2016, 22).

One of the problems with this cultural tourism is that 'non-white culture' is reduced to its celebration and for a couple of days, the dress, customs and practices are mimicked and used for entertainment. In a way, celebrating non-white culture simultaneously de-politicises it and reinforces the view that white is neutral and without culture. This move solidifies whites as without colour, culture or race and erases the violent history of oppression of many other cultures (Sullivan 2014, 98).

As the interview data confirmed, and as Sullivan explains, this performative tolerance is dangerous when it only extends to the celebration of major religious holidays and festivals and not to respective cultures following their faith at home. Most respondents gave answers that suggested they

do not practice a complete acceptance of all religions, races and cultures. Devices such as using 'us' and 'them' to separate whites from non-whites, and blaming cultural differences for the lack of integration are all ways to subtly reinforce a racist agenda while seeming non-racist (DiAngelo 2011).

The respondents from the remaining two white schools, when asked the same question, did not provide similar answers, one respondent answered that they have no policy on diversity, and could not give an example of any class or lesson that would encourage this kind of learning, but added that this did not mean they excluded any students. She said, "We do not exclude and say you cannot come here. Everyone is welcome of course." The irony is quite clear, the respondent actively reassures the interviewer that they are not exclusive, but by virtue of these so-called white schools they are exclusive in their very nature. As noted, Dutch society already differentiates between 'black' and 'white' schools and each carries its own connotations about class and desirability of the school. Bonilla-Silva's discussion of the impact of racial segregation in the US is interesting to explore with the Dutch context in mind. He examines the social and spatial segregation and the ghettoisation of blacks in the US. The segregation allows whites to subconsciously view all-black neighbourhoods as reprehensible, of a lower class, morally lacking and in doing so attribute a set of characteristics and behavioural patterns onto a racialised group. Whites use this to argue a fundamental difference in *culture* which allows them to criticise the race as a whole. In the same way whites insist a black culture is developed in all-black neighbourhoods, Bonilla-Silva argues the same happens in all-white neighbourhoods, this he calls the "white habitus" (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 104). Whites too thus develop a set of cultural norms and belief systems, thoughts and emotions which lead to a sense of white belonging (and also fosters a sense of unease towards non-whites). But whites refuse to see whiteness as a racialised category in the same way as blackness. Bonilla-Silva claims that due to this segregation from a young age children already know and can recognise a cultural attachment to their fellow 'racial group'. If this is instilled from primary school age, by secondary school they will stay set in their groups and maintain a segregated lifestyle even when in an institution that is culturally diverse. (Bonilla-Silva 2007, 123). This is arguably happening in the Netherlands, the definition of schools as black and white, whereby each holds a different cultural value, perpetuates the trend of segregation:

Because they live in another neighbourhood and er, the neighbourhood I work the houses are for rent, and usually the people live in it don't have that much money, so it's all a lot of Marocc and Turkish people who have the lower jobs. And in the neighbourhood I live in its er, the houses [are] to buy... bought houses. ...It's still a lot of white people. That's the difference. And you also have two schools in Breda, and we always say oh its the higher "white" [*in air quotes*] school [Respondent D].

Respondent D works in a black school where the students are described as not having much money. It is necessary to read between the lines, but I believe she is saying that the white schools are considered

more desirable and this is linked to class but also race as she brings up Moroccans and Turks. She says her school is located in a black neighbourhood and is thus poorer. It is important to note that she uses the differentiation between rented housing and home ownership to establish the class divide between whites and non-whites⁷. Respondent C corroborates,

Respondent C: There is a lot of nationalities in my class that [are not] Dutch, so, er, the school is also in an area with a lot of foreigners around it. So, it's logic[ical] that we have a black school. But the children are tempted to go to other schools, of Doctors, if you know what I mean?

Interviewer: What, sorry?

Respondent C: The children of Dentists, of Doctors, they go to other schools. You know what I mean?

[*pause*]

Respondent C: It's not a high society school!

Here the respondent links the professions of Dentists and Doctors to higher class jobs, and as she has stated her class contains many non-white Dutch children we can infer that she is labelling them as lower class, lower status and, as she says, this makes the school less of a 'high society school'. Class still defines the desirability of certain schools, but crucially one's class is largely determined by skin colour; higher class here is almost always considered white.

This blurring of culture, religion and race is very common especially when the subject of race continues to be glossed over. Using colour-blindness techniques, the Dutch equate tolerance religious festivities for being anti-racist.

Theme 2: 'Not Our Problem'

Each respondent used colour-blind devices that assures the interviewer they recognise racism and that a discussion of race is important, but all adopt an attitude that suggests it is 'not my problem'. This attitude is quite typical of white behaviour according to Beverley Tatum. She identifies the "Sources of Resistance" (1992, 5) that whites encounter when a discussion of race is present, there is very often a reluctance from whites to accept that they might be prejudiced. When facts and lived experiences are presented to them it is often met with denial and resistance (Tatum 1992, 6). This attitude is clearly demonstrated by respondents who respond with denial and an unwillingness to shoulder any of the responsibility. All respondents from black schools said that they felt race and diversity discussion had more of a place in white schools due to a lack of contact with black children. While all of the respondents from the white schools maintained that as there was a lack of diversity in their schools it was never a topic that needed addressing.

⁷ See also DiAngelo (2011) for a discussion around how the quality of white space is judged.

When I asked whether the subject of race is explicitly addressed in their class, Respondent A from a majority white school said, “when you have a school in other parts of the Hague then you have to do this because children come from all over the place, and you have 60 cultures in your school.⁸” Another respondent stressed that she did not see it as a problem in her school as it was international and she did not encounter race-based biases. She gave a response that was common,

Maybe it's very naïve of me but I mean, I don't see it in our school, so there's not really - it's not really necessary - and of course we always talk about everybody's equal and you need to treat everybody the same even if they're Black or if they're Asian, of course we talk about these things but it's not like I have it as a...subject [Respondent B].

This ‘everybody is equal’ line downplays the structural biases that are operational, which routinely reinforce and uphold white privilege and keep members of the black community subordinated. It is not enough to say everyone is equal unless you first address the fact that everyone is not. In a system that favours one race (whites) over others, teaching children that everyone is equal regardless of race will in fact teach children that race is something that should not be discussed and won't encourage them to challenge the dominant white world view (Sullivan 2014, 91).

Respondent E said, “[I do not talk] specifically about race. I talk about how the children must be kind to each other and accept each other but I do not specifically talk about race.⁹” As tempting as it is for whites to follow this agenda, children instead, should be encouraged to have a discussion about not only differences of race, but the disparities, inequalities and injustices. Sullivan highlights a study that encourages a discussion about race between parents and children. The results showed that even clumsy and imperfect conversations about race have a positive impact on the child, and helps oppose dominant white views (Sullivan 2014, 97).

As highlighted, this lack of discussion about race-based disparity solidifies whites' sense of superiority and ignorance and does little to address current inequalities. This is dangerous because it rests on the paradox that claims people of colour are equal, face little discrimination, and have achieved total assimilation into Dutch society, while still claiming they know racism *is* present but they don't condone it because it is *wrong* (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 60). All respondents presented a positive image of themselves at the same time as they were avoiding the responsibility of addressing race in their own spaces.

⁸ Respondent A; see appendix.

⁹ Respondent E; see appendix.

Theme 3: White Invisibility

What follows is a strengthening of the position of white as default. An understanding of one's own whiteness is not addressed or deconstructed in the white psyche. It is common for whites to be oblivious that white is a coloured and raced position, given that we have grown up surrounded by images and cultural scripts that confirm whiteness as without race. Whites have been taught to view 'race' as something other than what we are, race is viewed as something that can be utilised for cultural property and entertainment but never fully deconstructed in terms of privilege and entitlement (McIntosh 1988). A combination of cultural tourism in the classroom and an entrenched habit of glossing over conversations about race for fear of saying the wrong thing leads to an invisibility of whiteness and a taboo around conversations around race. This taboo is instilled in the child at a young age by parents and teachers. The child picks up on the discomfort of the adults when race is mentioned, adults either avoid the discussion or use subconscious body language that suggests to the child that they are uncomfortable (Sullivan 2014, 106). This has led to the association of a discussion of race with emotions of anxiety, confusion and fear in children (Tatum 1992, 5; Sullivan 2014, 105) and thus is avoided. Race is avoided through guilt, shame or discomfort in white adults, this is passed to their children who learn the same emotions and thus avoid conversations about race. DiAngelo has labelled this "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2011). In this way it is a cycle that reinforces itself. This cycle is damaging for the white children as it cements a whitewashed vision of the world, they are not given the necessary tools to be able to deconstruct the privilege they have, nor will they be able to see the way they contribute to an unequal system as agents of racism. This ignorance and simultaneous advantage is what Wekker deems white innocence.

The responses from the interviews evidence that race is a subject that white Dutch people feel uncomfortable talking about, and as Sullivan argues above, this leads to a post-racial mindset that is prohibiting. Whiteness is a complicated term, and due to the very nature of how white innocence is maintained it remains invisible to many white people. As Sullivan explains, whiteness can conjure up white supremacist views¹⁰ and so discussion about it is often met with resistance (Sullivan 2014, 85). You can see this in operation clearly from Respondent A's response:

Interviewer: How important do you think it is to have some form of discussion about race at a young age?

Respondent A: [long pause] well, you know ——— in our school...they just...children accept each other like, ...yeah, quite easily. ——— and we talk about things but we never er...put so many...

¹⁰ As an aside, it is interesting to note that many respondents would answer the whiteness question with Adolf Hitler's attempt to create the 'pure' Aryan Race. Or they would provide examples of instances where white people have been persecuted in the past, e.g. whites in South Africa or the Jews during WWII. It is interesting how whiteness is so invisible that they immediately reach for one extreme and well-known example from history, (in a sense, something so far removed). rather than examining their own whiteness and how this might affect how they navigate life. Using examples where whites have been persecuted also highlights the necessity for white people to define themselves against an other, their own whiteness only becomes visible at the site of collective persecution.

errr...what do you call it....errr ——— pressure? No. Erm...*[speaks Dutch]* *[long pause]*. Well, we do not make it big.

When I asked respondents if they ever talked about whiteness, they all said no. All were shocked at the question, and many asked me to repeat or clarify what I meant by whiteness. One immediately answered “No.”¹¹ There was no hesitation and no possibility for further discussion. Whereas another, who had been teaching for 23 years, after a long pause, chuckled and said, “Yes, it’s a good one.”¹² She was one of the few who had previously in the interview exhibited an awareness that race and racial discrimination needed to be a key topic in the classroom at a young age. She went on to agree that whiteness should be discussed in the same way that we discuss other races. The others however did not share the same view:

Interviewer: Do you think you should talk about whiteness?

Respondent E: *[pause]* Erm, no. no. Not more than any others you know, not more than being Black, or Brown or Asian. I mean of course we are all equal, all the same you know. But no, no we don’t need to talk about being white more than anything else.

I have shown that, from the interviews conducted, white Dutch people show a reluctance to talk about race. They still use rhetoric and colour-blind semantic techniques to distance the white Dutch self from migrants and people of colour. Alongside this, white and black schools alike do not take responsibility for the teaching of race in a primary classroom. The results confirmed all respondents felt work could be done elsewhere which is indicative of white attitudes towards racism in general. From the data collected it becomes obvious that the respondents demonstrated an awareness of the existence of racism but none advocated a need for a dedicated discussion of the privileges that white bodies specifically carry compared to black bodies. To be able to recognise whiteness as a location of advantage (and to do this objectively without feeling guilt and shame) is necessary in deconstructing internalised beliefs about races and ethnicities and thus becoming non-racist. Not taking the need for dialogue about race and diverse representation seriously and not seeing it as necessary, significantly trivialises the lived experiences of people of colour.

Crucially, none of the respondents from Group 1 had considered their own white privilege before and a majority felt it was not a useful debate to have in the primary school classroom. Whiteness is an ideology that is constructed and maintained through a continuation of all-white spaces, all-white schools, lack of proper assimilation, and a whitewashed media. White people are

¹¹ Respondent A; see appendix.

¹² Respondent D; see appendix.

confronted with myriad of representations of themselves and this, among other things, grants them dominance. Equally important to recognise, is that white representations are still gendered, the white man is deemed the neutral position, relegating white women to his inferior. Black, Asian, Hispanic and Muslim women are then judged in relation to the white woman, I go on to explore this further in Part II.

Part II

Whiteness as Innocence and Sexualised Racism

This chapter will utilise Wekker's account of white innocence alongside other scholars' definitions of whiteness to analyse data from the second set of interviews, discuss whiteness as a structural location and ideology and position this within the Dutch context using the results of the analysis. It will briefly look at the implications of sexualised racism within patriarchal society and how this has particular negative effects for non-white women.

Wekker's *White Innocence* (2016) uses three central concepts to discuss racism in the Netherlands: "Innocence"; "the Cultural Archive"; and, "White Dutch Self Representation" (pp.16-21). Wekker argues that the white Dutch sense of self is rooted in four hundred years of colonial rule and is therefore constructed on racialised discourse that depict blacks as the other. This view demarcates European whiteness as the antithesis of blackness, this is particularly evident in the way white Dutch people position themselves in relation to blacks from the former Dutch colonies, such as Suriname, Indonesia and parts of Africa. If this is the deeply rooted level from which whites from the Netherlands view people from other countries, this not only places Dutch whites in a self-imposed position of superiority over blacks, but also entrenches a loathing or fear of the assumed 'savage other' (hooks 2015, 71). This is unique to the European cultural memory, and is tied-up in the specific way the Netherlands and Europe enacted colonial rule over multiple other countries. It is not fully discussed or worked through in the Dutch context, (likewise in many other European nations), and yet has had repercussions ever since. Therefore, Wekker underlines the necessity to fully deconstruct and evaluate how white Europeans are still working through the effects of colonial rule and how this has deeply embedded some of our main perceptions about society. The inability of the Dutch nation to work through its colonial past, coupled with its self-perception as a small and vulnerable nation of victims works to reinforce and entrench a strong attachment to its white privilege (Wekker 2016, 6-16).

This chapter will demonstrate that white innocence is evident in the responses collected from both groups of interviews. The responses confirm the current academic position on whiteness. I use Frankenberg to illustrate the point that "Whiteness is a location of structural advantage" (1993, 1). It is the location from which white people view and observe the rest of the world (McIntosh 1988). Because representations of whiteness are everywhere, whiteness itself becomes disembodied and becomes the marker from which non-white people can be judged and compared. In establishing this disembodied position of neutral whiteness, one must reduce the other to its body. In order for whiteness to become something disembodied it needs to be not of the body and thus it is not raced.

Whiteness has become detached to the point that whites do not see themselves as raced, they view each and every white person as individual and thus lacking in a unified cultural identity (Frankenberg 1993, 2-6; Dyer 1997, 2). Blackness is located, it is embodied in the feature of darker skin. In this way whiteness reinforces itself as the reigning superior position (Dyer 1997, 14). It is a hierarchy and a club to which membership is only granted if your skin looks white. If you are not granted membership the perks are glaringly obvious. To those inside the exclusive club, seeing the perks may not be as much of a challenge as truly attributing them to the colour of one's skin. Once race can be truly recognised as a socially constructed category that is based on the idea that the categories shift depending on different socio-political contexts (Frankenberg 1993, 11), whiteness can also be recognised as a category within this system. The position of whiteness needs to be deconstructed and analysed as a category as such. Reni Eddo-Lodge talks about the British context:

When white people pick up a magazine, scroll through the internet, read a newspaper or switch on the TV, it is never rare or odd to see people who look like them in positions of power or exerting authority. In culture, particularly, the positive affirmations of whiteness are so widespread that the average white person doesn't even notice them. Instead, these affirmations are placidly consumed. To be white is to be human; to be white is universal. I only know this because I am not (Eddo-Lodge 2017, xvii).

This essentially sets the scene for representations of whiteness in the Dutch context. Unsurprisingly, those that are thus assimilated into Dutch culture have white skin, whereas those with darker skin are the ones not integrated as fully "Dutch". Naming multicultural schools 'black schools' emphasises that if you cannot assimilate you will be segregated (Essed 1994). Despite the fact the Dutch culture is made up of many different migrant backgrounds, ethnicities, and races, true Dutchness persists in being equated to whiteness and Christianity (Wekker 2016, 7). This lack of identification with migrants or indeed anyone that does not look like them is also linked to the 'not our problem' outlook that shifts blame onto others. It places responsibility for societal failures on migrants and in doing so labels them as the problem. Wekker contends that a combination of these factors has created a huge blind spot in the Dutch cultural memory and has contributed to a sense of white superiority over people of colour (Wekker 2016, 6-16). My interview results from Group 1, affirm Wekker's conclusions.

When the nation collectively views those that are not white as not Dutch, it leads to inherent exclusion of minorities, or endemic racism. Respondent C stated, "I think - I think what you mean - If I understand it - if there are erm, pictures of er, not Dutch people?¹³" It is completely transparent that Respondent C equates 'Dutch' with 'white' in this extract. Thus,

¹³ Respondent C; see appendix.

People of colour will forever remain *allochtonen*, the official and supposedly innocuous term meaning “those who came from elsewhere,” racializing people of color for endless generations, never getting to belong to the Dutch nation. The counterpart of “allochtonen” is *autochtonen*, meaning “those who are from here,” which, as everyone knows, refers to white people (Wekker 2016, 15).

There was a thread, often left unsaid, but sometimes explicitly evident, that it was *their* lack of integration that led to racial discrimination in the Netherlands. This view that responsibility lies with minority groups to assimilate, comes with the accusation that minorities are too quick to say they face discrimination, suggesting the discrimination is somehow their fault because they did not succeed in assimilating to Dutch culture:

Turkish and Arabic people...they do not integrate well. They don't speak the language very well. They keep their own culture in house. They don't mingle with the Dutch. Erm, only at school the children mingle with the Dutch - at home, they watch Turkish television or Arabic television, they dress Arabic - its no problem! - but when you just - [you give] a party [for] a child and you don't go there and you don't even call, to tell why you can't come because, why? Doesn't matter! That's the cultural gap. The gap between two cultures. The Arabic, Turkish, Polish also. The difference between them at home...but at school there is no difference, they are exactly the same, they are learning language, mathematics, writing and all different types of stuff, but when they are growing bigger, they can see the difference between home and school. I think then, then starts the problem. There is discrimination, I think. But I don't know for sure, this is what I think. This is not scientifically based but what I think [Respondent C].

This aligns with the attitude Wekker describes of Dutch people and puts into practice some of the semantic devices and “dominant racial frames” of colour-blind racism that Bonilla-Silva elucidates (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 26). Here Respondent C has stated emphatically “It's no problem!” that Arabic or Turkish people follow Arabic or Turkish cultural traditions in their home, before proceeding to outline why it is in fact a problem, and how it is this cultural gap that leads to discrimination of minorities in Dutch society. At the end she emphasises that she “doesn't know” and this is not “scientifically based”, demonstrating another colour-blind semantic device that in a sense absolves responsibility for casual racism. By using rhetorical shields whites can bury their racism within iterations of non-racist sentences and phrases (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 57).

I think also, that Arabic children, or Turkish children or Polish children, when they are getting older, they are fast with saying, [*puts on voice*] “Ugh, you said that! That's discrimination” and I don't think that's always true. They are too fast to say it's discrimination because they don't get their way in what they want [Respondent C].

The authority white people speak from is one that has been reinforced by millennia of white voices claiming a false universalism. “White people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite

see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail” (Dyer 1997, 9). Through over-saturation of white viewpoints whites have successfully staked their claim on the view that the white voice is neutral. This has become so entrenched that it has become the benchmark from which others relate to themselves. Bonilla-Silva did extensive methodological interviews to analyse whites behaviour around the subject of race and racism in the USA, and the results exposed a tendency for whites to attribute their successes to individual work ethic, high achieving mentality and internal factors, they were as likely to attribute the lower status of blacks in America to a lack of work ethic and motivation. There was little to no regard for the social structures that systemically favour one race over another in countries across the world (Bonilla-Silva 2007, 103-111). When white people fail to be held accountable for the way the system favours them, systemic racism will not be held to account and racist systems of oppressions will not be shifted.

Representations of Black Women

A lack of successful assimilation is being used here as an example of contemporary Dutch racism by respondents. This acknowledges racism to some extent and in the same breath denies accountability. Placing responsibility on minority groups for a lack of integration stems from a naïve but deep-rooted racism and a failure to understand white privilege, in other words, white innocence, and this has deeper implications for women who are not white. Even at the very base of society, in its language, there is subliminal prejudice (DiAngelo 2011, 55). As already highlighted, the use of *allochtonen* and *autochtonen* in Dutch society is used to increase the gap between whites and 'others'. This is deeply entrenched and tied up with constructions of the European self that have been built on an imperial, patriarchal past. Modern constructions of a European 'us' are defined against an 'other'. This 'other' changes depending on who is being vilified in society but the fundamental desire remains continuous: an inability to reconcile European identity with the black 'other' (Wekker 2016, 21).

This is displayed in the way respondents would subconsciously separate the 'us' from the 'them'. When Respondent A spoke about a sports event, she described the reaction from the children in her 'white school' upon meeting students of colour:

...Once, when we [met] other students from other parts of the city, in, for instance, the Sport Olympics which we do every year, they are sort of surprised like, “Oh! Do I have to - [laughs] to [play] Hockey against *those people!*? Ohh! They're big!” [laughs] “Oh dear!”¹⁴

Specifically here, Respondent A was referring to black children, as she later clarifies they were people of “dark skin”, and it is clear she is speaking from a common narrative in Dutch society of phobia of

¹⁴ respondent A

black people, men especially. These narratives are born from colonialism, and are embedded through words, pictures, and stereotypes. “We are confronted with the tenacity of forces that have shaped dominant white self-representation over a long period of four hundred years of imperialism” (Wekker 2016, 48). The representation of blacks as savage, as exotic, as over-sexualised, Wekker argues, is inextricably tied-up with images from the colonies, and prevails to this day. There is a fear, and simultaneous desire, within the Dutch psyche that depicts blacks as animalistic savages. This is incredibly entrenched and difficult to confront, especially coupled with a lack of education in the Dutch curriculum about Dutch imperial expansion (Wekker 2016, 13). Hence, the construction of white identity as innocent is reliant upon an opposing construction of the barbaric other (hooks 1992). Black bodies become canvases for white bodies to project their fears and loathing onto. In recognising the other in blackness the white man posits himself as the neutral and the baseline of humanity. Dutch whiteness is confirmed and strengthened through a negative depiction of the other, in this case, blacks and migrants (Wekker 2016, 34). These constructions become gendered as well as raced. White women are seen as race-free in the way that black women are not. They are the norm, the standard to which other women must aspire, and are then subsequently judged based upon their locale in relation to white women. Categories of women are then divided into the standard (white, thin) and ethnic (any deviants from the ‘norm’). The sexualisation of black women is at the heart of Dutch racism, colonial images of black women are the dominant images that young black girls see and internalise (hooks 1993; hooks 2015, page; Wekker 2016, 62). Women, and especially non-white women, are stereotyped, de-humanised and sexualised. They face stronger scrutiny and harsher criticism.

Black female bodies are almost always framed within a context of patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualisation. They are de-aestheticized and de-eroticized. This process began during the colonization of this continent [USA] by white Europeans...The totality of our received body image, our inherited body politics is always that of bondage - the body taken over, stripped of its own agency and made to serve the will, desire and needs of other (hooks 1993, 67).

Women of colour become the other, a position that white women fail to attempt to understand. White women are invested in ignoring the differences between themselves and women of colour refusing to acknowledge them for fear of highlighting the ways in which they have, in many ways, contributed to the continued oppression of black women (Lorde 1980). Young black girls and black women are fed a colonial, distorted, vision of themselves they must work hard to unlearn. One’s sense of self-worth is in part determined by the images of self we see reflected; images we are exposed to play a significant role in shaping our view of ourselves. When these images are so widespread to the extent that society itself is coded as white, those who are not white must wonder where they fit in. Thus, white women too must recognise the role they play in upholding these images and help to challenge and reverse them.

As shown, in Dutch society whiteness is taken as the norm, the ordinary and the neutral. The baseline of society that others look to, to see themselves reflected in. White people are over-represented in literature, movies, magazines and advertisements and this leads to the assumption for the rest of the Dutch nation that this is the standard to which others should aspire. Over-saturation of representations of whiteness contributes to the fierce protection of whiteness that needs to be incessantly reinforced (Stoler, cited in Wekker 2016, 44-45). Eddo-Lodge talks of how it was to be a black girl growing up in the UK, when the whole of humanity is coded as white and at four years old she was already wishing she looked like the women on TV, in other words, white (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 85). This illustrates the dramatic effects a whitewashed media had on the psyche of a child aged just four. Those who are not featured in this vision of society are left with a constant sense of not belonging and this has major repercussions for their own self-esteem, self-worth and thus their contribution to society (Eddo-Lodge 2017). I turn now to an analysis of the responses given from the second interview of Group 2, with Marike and Naomi.

Marike and Naomi both reflect on what it was like growing up in the Netherlands. I ask, "Have you thought about what it means to be white?" Marike, a white, blonde-haired and blue-eyed Dutch citizen, responds, "No I don't think so. I don't think so because I just was born like this. When I look at her [*Naomi, who is black*], I think it's more a thing than when I look at myself.¹⁵" This suggests a construction of self based on the other. Marike is forced to confront her whiteness when in contact with Naomi. I argue that black women are always aware of their blackness as they are bombarded with representations of whiteness portrayed as the norm. As Naomi confirms when I asked her the same question, what does it mean to be black growing up? "Well, I was thinking about it. What my mum used to tell me when I was a little bit younger, she would tell me, Naomi, do your best. Because you are one step behind. Always. Always because of my colour. Do you your best, show that you are worth.¹⁶" From a young age, black children grow up aware of their blackness confronted with people who don't look the same as them. White children grow up secure in the knowledge they fit in, and are often only confronted with their whiteness when in the presence of someone who is not. People of colour do not benefit from the privileges white bodies carry, meaning they learn very quickly that this view of society is not in fact neutral, as it's made out to be, but coloured also. For white people this viewpoint can remain unchallenged for most of their life (DiAngelo 2011, 63-64).

The interview data collected and analysed in the first half affirms Wekker's argument that white innocence operates in the Dutch context. From the responses, all white respondents seemed to

¹⁵ See appendix 8.

¹⁶ See appendix 8.

demonstrate the epistemology of ignorance: in demonstrating a lack of understanding of structural and systemic racism and simultaneously disavowing it exists, meanwhile reaping the benefits of the privilege of white skin, white innocence is upheld in Dutch society and even defended.

Bibliotheek Utrecht: A Study

In order to see how this was further entrenched and embedded in the white Dutch psyche, I analysed 200 books from Utrecht Public Library, 126 of these were Dutch children's books¹⁷ to see how many focused on white-centric narratives and characters.

I discovered 23 of the Dutch books analysed featured people of colour (POC) as periphery roles (those that had speaking parts), 8 featured POC as a main character, and 2 featured no white characters¹⁸. This means that from my sample, only 18.25% of Dutch children's books analysed show people of colour, even as token characters, in comparison with 74% all-white narratives. It was telling that the accepted makeup of a classroom scene in the books I examined included just a handful of

SAMPLE	126
No POC	25
Incl. POC 'token'	68
Incl POC as peripheral role	23
Incl POC as main role	8
No whites	2

Table 2: Analysis of children's books in Utrecht Public Library

other token ethnicities: out of all the books I analysed, not one classroom was made up of majority black student characters or ethnicities other than white. This is not representative of the schools in which my interviewees worked, where three of six classes included a minority of white students. It is perhaps not representative of all schools across the Netherlands either.

From those that placed POC as peripheral roles, most still solidified whites as the main focus of the story, thereby upholding the over-representation of whites and simultaneously fitting people of colour into marginal roles in a move that does not completely eradicate black presence, but casts it as a supporting role.

¹⁷ Dutch authors and Dutch publishers.

¹⁸ Additionally, I found of the 73 translated children's books analysed (i.e. not written by Dutch authors and illustrators) 17 featured POC in periphery roles, 4 featured POC as main characters and 2 featured no white characters. Thus, 23% of the translated texts featured POC and 68.5% were all-white narratives. There is no significant difference between Dutch children's books and translated children's books, but what it does show is that across the board there is an over-representation of whiteness.

I found in stories where people of colour had main roles, it was majority girls as the main character, conversely where whites played a main role, it tended to be boys. This illustrates that it is not only white supremacy that remains dominant, but white patriarchal supremacy.

Finally, out of the nine books where a person of colour was the main character, the storyline focused on their lived experience as POC, and a third of those focused on their lived experience specific to their race. By contrast, of the total 200 books I reviewed, not a single one focused on the whiteness of white characters. White culture, or whiteness, is taken for granted as something that needs no explanation because white culture is taken as the norm. In this way white supremacy reinforces itself in supposedly liberal European countries (DiAngelo 2011, 61). The books that have black characters as main roles more often than not have storylines that reference being black, growing up black, and challenges specific to being black. White children are not taught through picture books how their privilege allows them to navigate a society in a different way than people who are not white. White privilege in these children's stories is invisible and therefore unaccountable. I conclude from this research that while there is some progress in children's books becoming both mirrors and windows for a diverse audience, there is still an overwhelming over-saturation of white characters and white-centred storylines.

The next chapter will take a closer look at the role children's literature specifically can play in helping to deconstruct this white innocence in a Dutch context, and start to pave the way for discussions surrounding white privilege.

Part III

Illustrating Whiteness

This chapter will take an interdisciplinary approach to the question of the impact of children's literature on the child and will bring in debates from Critical Children's Literature studies. I will bring in the social experiment by Sunny Bergman from her documentary *White is a Colour* that starkly illustrates subconscious biases in children. It concludes that whiteness needs to be deconstructed in order for white innocence to stop being passed on to Dutch children as learned behaviour, and suggests one way to break this cycle is through children's literature.

A Brief Introduction to Critical Children Studies

When I refer to children's literature I mean picture books aimed at 'young' children anywhere between four and nine. Children's picture books include illustrations alongside text and have, since the nineteenth century, developed into an art form themselves. The aesthetics of a children's picture book is now just as important as the text (Hunt 2005, 7-8); both complement each other and at the same time can be interpreted as separate narratives as pictures open the way for multiple interpretations. The significance of picture books as a medium for analysis is the debate surrounding their target audience, their potential for multiple readings and their subversive nature (Anstey & Bull cited in Hunt 2004, pp. 328-339). Before proceeding there is a need to note the role that class can play when analysing children's books, for example in terms of the availability of money and time. This will influence the accessibility of books as well as the time and inclination to spend reading them. Therefore, it is important to keep this in mind when analysing the breadth of impact children's literature can have on deconstructing white innocence across Dutch society.

Within the field of Critical Children's Literature Studies there is argument and debate about the extent to which children absorb information from books at a young age and how they interact with complex plots and storylines. Equally, there has been much debate about how subversive messages can be construed through pictures (Nodelman cited in Hunt 2005, pp.128-138). Peter Hunt, a prominent theorist, argues that children's books do have an influence and an impact on the child's development saying they are one of the few sites where you can find critical communication between adult and child (Hunt 2005, 2).

They are overtly important educationally and commercially – with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority of those in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development (Hunt 2005, 1).

This clearly supports the view that children's literature has an impact on shaping the ideologies of the child, however, to what extent this is true depends on their learning environment, the books they are exposed to and their own race. There is a lack of intersectionality in this view, however, for example, to whom is Hunt referring when he says 'most adults?' Likely, he assumes the adults to be white males like himself. Hunt stresses the autonomy of the reader, in particular the child reader, and their interaction with picture books. Picture books aid with the child's aesthetic development and this helps challenge children and introduce them to large concepts. This viewpoint affirms the view that even if children are not picking up all of the complexities, the picture books themselves are encouraging their cognitive learning process, thus having a significant impact on the child (Doonan cited in Hunt 2005, 8).

Jacqueline Rose argues that because children's picture books are written by adults they are not intended for the child at all. She claims children's fiction is a site where you find not what the child wants but what the adult desires; the author will subconsciously project their own fantasies of childhood onto the children through books, that they expect the child to emulate. The point at which Hunt and Rose concur is the underestimated autonomy of the child by children's authors and critics. There is an assumption that 'children' are a homogenous group, but this fails to recognise class, education, and most crucially for this thesis, gender and race. She suggests that because the author's presence is not explicit, the adult can manipulate text and messages to create a mirror of their own fantasies but under the guise of being for the 'child'. In doing this they also project a pure universalism onto the child and in essence strip the child of their autonomy (Rose 1984). I argue in the following paragraphs that it is crucial to recognise that children are simultaneously both receptor's of knowledge (with regards to normalised behaviours around race that they learn from parents and teachers) and autonomous agents in their own right.

In Rose's view, the problem occurs when adults assume the child is universally pure and innocent and that authors and adults can create a simple reality that reflects the world around us, and expect a universal application of this to children (Rose 1984). This marks a failure of appreciating the intersection of race, class, gender, dis/abilities and sexuality in children. This is critical for this study because I argue that this universalism has assumed a white male perspective in children's literature for too long, and the simple reality has embedded a Dutch white innocence that supports the view of white as the default race. Thus, Dutch children come to see whiteness as the norm and the neutral position in society which places black children on the outside of this frame. They are relegated to *allochtonen*: forever on the outside looking in. This contributes to a perennial re-enforcement of white innocence in white Dutch adults, who, no matter what liberal values they try to show externally, deep down feel a sense of superiority in their white self as Dutch citizens and thus relegate black and brown Dutch people to the status of other. This is passed down to their white children and the cycle is not

broken. There is a sense in adults, and particularly Dutch adults¹⁹, of wanting and needing to keep the child in a state of innocence for as long as possible, leaving them 'untainted' with discussions about race in the sense that race is viewed as tainted (Sullivan 2014, 92). Respondent D was the only one of the three that recognised the potential impact of children's books, but she maintained the view that young children were not aware of what they were reading. This I found in all of my interviews where they would reiterate the innocent nature of the child. Phrases emerged along the lines of 'I do not judge'; 'I do not see colour'; 'the children do not judge'; 'they do not need to be bothered by these matters'²⁰.

A Childlike Innocence

I affirm both Hunt and Rose's arguments that grant the child more autonomy than author's of children's books have previously done. This autonomy is also applied when learning behaviours around race and racism. Sullivan writes that adults assume white children have a naïvety about racism, when in fact they demonstrate the opposite. They actually possess a very astute knowledge of race. They learn from a very young age how to circumnavigate a discussion of race in a way that ultimately reinforces white innocence (Sullivan 2014, pp.92-95). Sullivan gives examples where children in the classroom have exhibited learned behaviour about how to avoid explicitly discussing race from a young age²¹.

Most respondents believed that children were too young to really absorb the benefits of diversity in literature. However, children as young as three are said to differentiate between different races (Tatum 1992, 5). It follows that as they become older these differences become coded, and some races are coded with more value than others. This process starts from birth and becomes lodged subconsciously in the psyche as the dominant cultural paradigm proliferates images that code white as good and black as bad. Beverley Tatum uses William Cross's *Black Racial Identity Development* model (1971, 1978, 1991 cited in Tatum 1992, 10). He outlines the key stages in the process of racial development; number one being "pre-encounter". To paraphrase, this involves absorbing the values of the dominant (white) culture, including the fundamental belief in 'white is right' and negative views of blacks (Cross in Tatum 1992, 10-12). This obviously has serious psychological impacts on the black child, and due to the patriarchal formation of society, particular effect on the young black girls and their sense of self (hooks 1993; Lorde 1978).

¹⁹ Wekker contends that the Dutch attachment to themselves as a nation of innocent victims transfers the childlike state of childhood onto themselves as Dutch citizens (2016, 13).

²⁰ See appendix for transcripts of interviews.

²¹ Briefly, these include an example of young girl whose classmate teases her in a racially motivated way, but because she has learned that adults avoid explicitly mentioning race, she omits the fact of race when telling a teacher. Another example includes a child aged 2½ who asks his mother if 'black men are bad'. He has picked up on his mother subconsciously steering the handles of the pram away from black men on the street (Sullivan 2014, pp.92-95; 106).

This stage of pre-encounter can be seen explicitly in Sunny Bergman's documentary *White Is Also A Colour* during which she sets up an experiment with thirty white and black children of around five years old to see if they exhibit subconscious racial biases. She uses black and white dolls and cartoons and asks a series of questions to the children. She asks which doll is the smartest? Around 75% pointed to the white doll, and one said "Because this doll has a normal colour." 80% of children answered that the black doll was the naughtiest, similarly 85% pointed to the white doll when asked who was prettier. 90% of the parents watching the experiment would consider themselves liberal, left-leaning parents who would not demonstrate overt or conscious racism (Bergman: *White is Also A Colour*, 2016). This shows us how black and white children pick up on the colour hierarchy from a young age despite potentially not being exposed to overtly racist displays of behaviour. Thus, we must examine where these coded values about skin colour come from. I argue one way is through early primary literature (picture books) that are oversaturated with white perspectives and if this indoctrination begins in children as young as five, it makes it all the more pressing to start tackling these preconceptions early on, and start to undermine the white supremacy of cultural signifiers. Using these examples suggests children of all races are incredibly sensitive to influence from external factors but it would be wrong to assume all children are influenced in the same way and to the same level, otherwise I risk falling prey to universalising all children's experiences as the same.

As my argument contends, if the supply of children's literature is whitewashed this will impact the imagination of young non-white children, their self-esteem and ultimately their self-worth. In other words, representation matters, diversity is important in stories. Pictures can be read in multiple ways and provide numerous interpretations. We must also accept that pictures and books are subjective and to some extent always represent a misrepresentation of the world (Nodelman cited in Hunt 2005), therefore we must place greater emphasis on the child to decode messages they are being given. It is necessary that young white Dutch children grow up to know about other realities too. "... [I]t is dangerous to see only mirrors of your own life and reality reflected back. It creates an over-inflated sense of self worth and can contribute to a lack of empathy in others' experiences" (Sims Bishop 1990). I argue this is being shown in the Dutch case.

Not only subversively through the messages within the books, but practically as well, adults control the supply and the distribution. Those who currently choose what books students read in their classes equally have the potential to help shape their students' ideology and thus play an important role. From my interviews with Dutch primary school teachers, most (but not all) of Group 1 answered using the frames of colour-blind racism. What does this then mean for the ideology and attitudes children will adopt as they get older?

In half of the primary schools in which the interviewees worked, classroom materials were not diverse, even though the children were. Of those schools that claimed to use a diverse range of literature in the classroom (three of six) I asked what the teachers thought their students of colour

would feel if they were to see themselves reflected positively in classroom materials. Respondent E (majority white school) emphasised that she had no black or brown children in her class and this is why it would cause no problems not having diverse materials for her students. As I have already argued, I think it is also important for white children to be exposed to realities other than their own. If white children are not being actively encouraged to explore and learn realities other than their own, it leads to white Dutch citizens blindly perpetuating and never examining white patriarchal superiority that is bred through over-representation of white as default²². Respondent B attempted to show that she could relate to the other side of the discussion, using her black colleague as reference,

If I was to see only black children, or whatever, in books, I would also think 'hmm, you know that's not really what the world is like', so I think they would say something about it...But we have er, a lot of erm, teachers from all over the world as well. We have one teacher from Nigeria and she's really offended by it, by the whole *Zwarte Piet* thing. So, I know that erm, maybe for me, it wouldn't be er, I - I - I [*exhales*] I would say well, I don't really mind if there's Black or Asian or whatever - er, in books, er but I am sure, because [my colleague] is black and feels that way I'm sure that the children would feel it that way as well. Even though they maybe...wouldn't say so, but I know in their heart they would feel that way probably. They would feel offended that there's no black children in the books. But it's very diverse in our books [Respondent B].

There is autonomy granted to the child in this response, but she is quick to place herself outside of the debate, to reinforce that she is not black therefore she would not know. This allows her to tiptoe around the crux of the subject remaining safe outside the realm of possibility for hurt and offence and ultimately avoiding an in-depth discussion of race (Bonilla-Silva 2007, 49).

Children's books are sites where innocence and adulthood become blurred. This idea of innocence is interesting when teamed with a discussion about white innocence. In a sense the whiteness of children's literature can be seen as an extension of this innocence: if whiteness is claimed as 'good', 'pure' and 'blank' and this is how adults view children, then they will want their children's books to reflect this. The picture books therefore can become sites for the adult to project innocence onto the child and thus restore it back to themselves (Rose 1984). In order to make Rose's argument, that children's books are written by the adult for the adult, more potent I would add the following bracketed words: (white) children's picture books written by (white) adults hold an adult (white) agenda and therefore are never for (ethnic minority) children.

Thus I conclude that it is unclear to what extent children's books significantly *shape* children's attitudes towards race specifically, but they have been and still are effective tools in upholding the

²² Especially when coupled with a secondary education where the curriculum is predominantly white (male) authors, texts and materials, and no compulsory education about the Dutch colonial past (Wekker 2017, 13).

white subconscious prerogative of coding white as the default narrative. This entrenches a dominant white supremacist culture that needs to be unlearned at the site between white adults and white children. White parents and school teachers need to encourage a discussion of race instead of perpetuating the old cycle (Sullivan 2014, 113-115).

From the Group 2 interviews, Marike and Naomi confirmed children's books included only white characters in the daycare where they worked, but Marike surprised Naomi telling us that she had many different ethnicities of dolls. This led to a discussion about the children's books, and also teenage books they remembered reading growing up. Naomi continued, "Yeah, well if I think about it, they were mainly white. I cannot remember a book where there was someone like me. Like, no, never."²³ One must wonder about the impact this has on young black girls growing up. Naomi used a personal anecdote to illustrate her opinion on why she felt that showing a diverse mix of characters in children's picture books would be useful in society:

Naomi: I think it would, would be really effective because once I - I - teached [*sic*] - I was a group leader of a tennis club during the summer and there were mostly kids from Hilversum - it's a part of Holland [that's] very white, it's very classy, like really posh - and I [taught] them a little bit of tennis, and one kid asked me, "Do you sunbathe a lot?" And I was like, "Er, no. This is my colour." And he was like, "But how come you have that colour?" And they didn't understand and I think if they had books with more diversity they would understand immediately how did I get this colour. You know?

Interviewer: And how old were they?

Naomi: That kid was, I think, 7 or 8. Old enough to know. So he should have known that I don't sunbathe and become this colour, but because my parents come from another country. He didn't know so I have to explain. And that's quite shocking. He was old enough.

This shows how a lack of exposure to other cultures and races had an impact on that white child who was never exposed to a reality other than his own. I expand that to include the black child who has to grow up without multiple representations of self. Not only does this allow white children to be left unaccountable for ignorance surrounding other cultures but also keeps them ignorant about their own privilege. "White children receive little if any guidance regarding the predicament they face, let alone in how to resolve it" (DiAngelo 2011, pp.63-64).

It is clear that in schools and Dutch society there is a lack of representation of people of colour and non-white narratives in children's literature. Whites' sense of racial belonging is solidified by over-representation; we constantly see our own image and experience reflected back at us. Therefore, while it is left unclear the extent to which children's books play a part in the racial development and awareness of race in children, I am arguing that they have potential. A perpetuation of white superiority and white innocence is bred through a whitewashed set of children's literature

²³ See appendix 8.

that posits whiteness as the norm and the default race. My research shows that white Dutch teachers that use white resources in their classrooms also display colour-blind attitudes that gloss over the complexities of race and racial inequality. This has damaging consequences for the self-esteem and self-worth of non-white students, particularly women and girls. Crucially, there is no accountability being taught to white children through these books about the privilege that comes with being white, whereas there is a trend (identified from my library study) that books that feature diversity focus on what it means to be black or a person of colour. I argue that the same needs to be done for white children. If key children's literature theorists maintain that adults play a role in children's literature then let's utilise the potential for white children to learn through literature that can explicitly highlight their whiteness, and encourage an open discussion of race, thus challenging the taboo of race in the Netherlands. To exemplify this point I have included two pages of my own children's story, that attempts to put the themes of this thesis into a practical example, in the appendix. I do not claim that it is perfect, nor that it addresses white privilege thoroughly, but it hopefully it illustrates the main thread of my argument, and potentially inspires others.

Conclusion

This study has used Gloria Wekker's explanation of white innocence as the foundation for interrogating prevailing racism in the Netherlands. This thesis has maintained that it is a subtle and embedded form of racism fundamentally disguised as innocence. One way I have shown this racism pervades society is through a whitewashed set of children's literature that reinforces a view that whiteness is a norm and the default. Not recognising whiteness as a raced position allows whites to locate themselves against an other and therefore retain racist attitudes. This entrenches and internalises a feeling of white superiority in white children, and cements an us versus them culture. Thus white innocence is reinforced and never explicitly deconstructed in sites of learning. I interviewed white Dutch primary school teachers to discuss whether the topic of race is discussed in the classroom. The data showed that a majority did not discuss matters of race in the classroom and all felt that it was not their place or problem to deal with. I argue that this mentality upholds an ignorance about racism in the Dutch context, and this is particularly evident in Dutch white people who show a lack of understanding about how their own whiteness gives them privilege in society. This study utilised key literature from Critical Children's Literature Studies to understand the extent to which children's literature can have an impact on the child's ideologies. It concluded that fair representation of all members of society, positive role models and images that deconstruct outdated colonial imagery are very important for a child of colour's self-esteem and self-worth. If the images that are fed to children are based on a belief that places 'outsider' status on non-white bodies, we internalise a set of norms that fundamentally entrench the belief that white equates with good and black with bad. This leads to subconscious and conscious racist attitudes towards black and ethnic minorities, including fear, suspicion and aggression, which fuels an imbalance of power in society. This can be seen from the way the interview respondents still labelled Dutch schools as 'black schools' and 'white schools' and how many of the respondents automatically associated the higher class neighbourhoods with whiteness. Primary school is a crucial time to help shape children's views and attitudes. This study has argued that a crucial point where whiteness can be addressed is in primary school classrooms. But it has also recognised that children cannot be assumed as a homogenous 'innocent' group, and that each child interacts with narrative and storylines differently, which is also part of the influence of external factors. I argue that if we can recognise children as active agents of racism (based on the subliminal messages passed from parents and teachers) we can also grant them the autonomy to cope with discussions of race from a young age. Children's books are one way to bring discussions of complex concepts to the site of the child and hopefully start unlearning the feelings of guilt, shame and anger that for so long have been tied up in discussions of race.

Admittedly, it is no easy task as a white person to come to terms with the way in which an arbitrary trait such as your skin colour, has awarded you with a privileged position in society. Acknowledging our own privilege is the first step to dismantling unconscious racist behaviours. Crucially, a lot of these behaviours are subconscious and require active unlearning and conscious disavowal of racialised and gendered imagery. We need to actively unlearn these thought processes and, from the interview data collected along with the research from this study, this can start with:

- A recognition that 'Dutch' does not equate to 'white' promoting a better inclusion of ethnic minorities.
- A truer reflection of Dutch society in children's literature, which means not putting white characters as the morally good non-raced viewpoint that assumes a universal applicability.
- Fundamentally, a deconstructed idea of whiteness and white privilege, understanding that whiteness is not a morally superior location but one that was created by and for whites during the process of colonisation of other countries.

Tatum describes "Autonomy" as the final stage in the *White Racial Identity Development* model (Helms 1990 cited in Tatum 1992, 17). At this stage whites have successfully internalised a new set of beliefs around whiteness as an identity. This means whites who have reached this stage start to actively confront racism in everyday situations; forge stronger alliances with people of colour and openly discuss race without triggering feelings of guilt, shame and anger. It is crucial to realise this is an ongoing process and one that does not end when this stage has been reached but must be enforced and cemented over time, but I argue this is ultimately the goal for society to fundamentally internalise a new belief system surrounding whiteness. The current accepted definition of whiteness and how we discuss it is inextricably tied up with feelings of superiority, of baseline neutrality, and can also trigger memories of a white supremacist past. It is absolutely fundamental to the progression of society that we adopt a new set of norms surrounding how we discuss and deconstruct whiteness, one way to do this is to utilise children's books for this end, encouraging and promoting discussions of whiteness and race with children at a young age. If we can be taught to hate then we can also be taught to love.

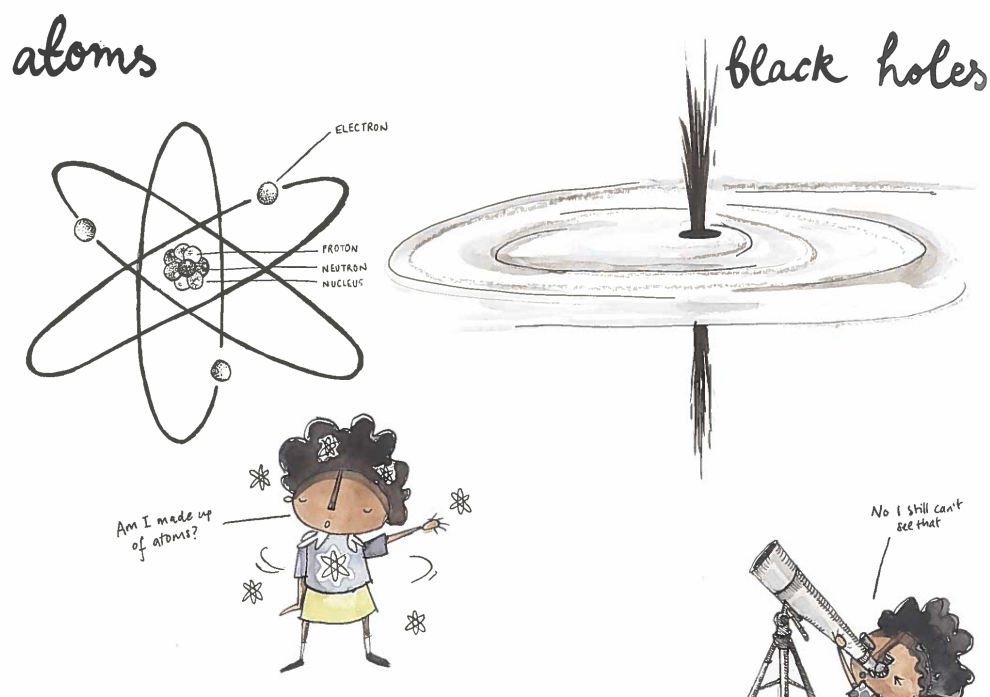
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Extract from *White Invisibility*, children's book written and illustrated by Esme Kemp:



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