

# Smash the Pillars

## Decoloniality and the Imaginary of Color in the Netherlands

Melissa F. Weiner and Antonio Carmona Báez (eds.).

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*Smash the Pillars. Decoloniality and the Imaginary of Color in the Dutch Kingdom* (2018) is an important intervention in current debates about the relevance of race in the Netherlands. The editors argue that coloniality – the continued yet denied existence of unequal power relations that emerged in colonialism – exists, but furthermore, that ‘[m]uch of this coloniality is directly linked to the Dutch historical and contemporary commitment to pillarization...’ (x). The editors claim that, much like the religious pillarization that organized Dutch society until the 1960s, today a ‘Muslim’ pillar has been put in place that combines Turks and Moroccans, and that ‘[o]thers suggest that each group could have their own pillar, thereby limiting possibilities for both inter- and intraracial justice-seeking mobilization’ (x). As a consequence of the implied homogeneity of each pillar, ‘this system justi-

fies and perpetuates religious, economic, and cultural differences between multiple groups within Dutch society and inhibits collaborative justice-seeking organization for equal rights between and across the multiple groups that make up the Netherlands’ (xi). In other words, they argue that colonial power relations are reproduced in the Netherlands through a divide and rule policy that not only creates racial categories, but also pits them against one another.

The book aims to address and counter this ‘pillarization’ with a decolonial approach that is situated in the Latin American decolonial tradition (drawing from scholars such as Quijano, Escobar, Mignolo, Dussel, Azaldúa, Grosfoguel and others), but also in various black radical traditions that, in the editors’ view, include thinkers and political figures such as C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Anton De Kom, W.E.B.

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authors in this volume do, on the necessity to further reflect on the question of what constitutes valid knowledge, and how this is constituted. As several authors argue, scholars are never detached from their political context, but I would add that we should also be wary of attacks on academic knowledge as simply an opinion and merely biased in one way or the other. Even if pure knowledge does not exist, I think it is important to have space to think about it and to take distance from political sentiments of the moment.

At first I was hesitant to review *Smash the Pillars* for this issue on *Race-ism*. Is it the place of a tenured white male academic, even one who is familiar with critical race theory, to comment on this book? But then the book is also an invitation, if not a demand, to engage in a way that is both comradely and critical. So let me first say something about the significance of the book for the Netherlands today as I see it.

For me, this book comes at an important political moment in the Netherlands: academics, activists, politicians, state representatives, and civil society actors at large debate race and racism more openly than ever before. *Smash the Pillars* is an intervention in these debates. Academics in particular are divided about whether or not to take race into consideration in scholarly analyses and practice (i.e. diversifying institutions), or whether to speak about 'discrimination' more broadly. To me there are valid arguments for either position, but I agree with one of the central tenets in the book, namely that there is no way around studying race. Let me explain briefly why I think so, and thereby provide some context to the book.

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various publications and statements, scientists and organizations such as UNESCO have rightly pointed out that race is a social construction (Lentin 2005). There is no biological, sociological, or historical ground to maintain the existence of clearly bounded and separate human races. Race has correctly come to be understood as a social construction with no absolute foundation in biology, history, and later genetics (even though all of these partake in the making of race, see M'charek 2014).

But the claim that race is a social construction has now become something quite different. In Europe even more so than in the United States, race is not only seen as a social construction, but as something that does not exist. Naming it is seen as dangerous, as if one is creating a monster. It has now been cordoned off so rigorously that it begins to turn into an object with almost magical qualities. This is especially true among social scientists (and less so in the life sciences), where race has become a taboo in its original meaning: a sacred object so powerful and dangerous that it must never be touched by humans. A Pandora's box that once opened, releases evil into the world. Yet this categorical refusal to engage with race can blind us to the shape-shifting form of race, in which it continues to inform social relations. The abandonment of the race concept has, as Alana Lentin, David Theo Goldberg and many others have shown, spurred the rise of the term 'culture'. Social scientists, but also policy makers or organizations such as the UNESCO have adopted the term culture or ethnicity in their vocabulary in the hope of breaking the essentializing power of race. However, culture has now taken on many of these essentializing qualities of race, all the while donning a seemingly more palatable and innocent gown.

The race concept, I want to emphasize, should not be used in a careless way, precisely because there is always the danger of reification. Race is paradoxical, a mirage as Fanon put it, simultaneously real and unreal (St Louis 2009). Or, as Stuart Hall (1996) said, (racial) identity is both necessary and 'impossible'. There is always a danger of interpellating that which one wishes to deconstruct. Scholars researching race do well to be mindful of this double bind.

However, and here I agree with the argument made by *Smash the Pillars*, the danger of reification should not lead us to simply ignore race. It is clear to me that we live in a time when race is an undeniable social reality. The Dutch Cabinet, we could recently read in the newspaper, has proposed to register race, ethnicity, and religion in gun permits as part of a new European arms guideline that was drafted after the Paris terror attacks of 2015. Simultaneously, black activists protesting the blackface tradition of black Pete are told by commentators on social media to 'get a new owner', and the Dutch politician of African descent Sylvana Simons is photo shopped into an image of a lynching party. On the other hand, the emerging Dutch civil rights movement mobilizes terms such as whiteness, blackness, people of colour, non-black people of colour, and the endless (colonial) degrees of blood and skin tone in sometimes (strategically) essentializing ways. I think that in this situation, anthropologists cannot simply look away and talk about discrimination and othering in generic terms. The reality is that race remains an ethnographic fact and anthropologists cannot ignore it. And why should we? We research all kinds of dangerous phenomena, such as conflict and violence. We research death and dying. We research nationalism, sexism,

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present '*the*' decolonial imaginary of colour, I had the impression that there are several, sometimes even contradictory, imaginaries. The book boasts a spectrum of perspectives, ranging from very rigid, almost essentialized to more porous and dynamic understandings of the coloniality of power. Teresa E. Leslie's claim that people on St Eustatius have internalized racism and live with a false consciousness, for example, presupposes rather stable identities of European oppression and Statian submission, leaving little room for the agency of Statians themselves. On the other hand, Francio Guadeloupe proposes to understand even Christianity not only in terms of false consciousness and colonial oppression, but also as prophetic, informing the pioneering work of towering figures such as Cornel West.

It is not surprising, then, that there is no uniform idea of the term 'decolonial' among the contributions to this volume. Indeed, the editors provide the widest possible definition, which includes anyone from the Maroons to Jomo Kenyatta, and from Anibal Quijano to Paul Gilroy. I wonder if these figures, or those who coined the term decolonial theory, would agree with such a characterization. It seems to me that important and instructive debates between, for instance, postcolonial and decolonial traditions of thought, between Africentric and Atlantic perspectives, or between subaltern studies and critical caste studies, are glossed over and subsumed to one single more or less homogenous tradition of 'decolonial thought'.

This tension between homogenization and diversification runs through the book, and is indeed present in the argument itself. While the editors call for the destruction of the pillars that reproduce colonial cate-

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gorizations of people, they also consistently speak about  
 'the Dutch' or 'the West' (often interchanged with  
 whiteness), and even recommend the registration of  
 race, which 'will also allow for race-based data to be  
 collected ... to address inequalities in every social  
 milieu – from health to education to employment to  
 housing to poverty' (207). To me this comes quite close  
 to the Dutch Cabinet's proposal mentioned above. In  
 other words, the book struggles with precisely the  
 dilemma of recognizing the need to talk about race  
 without interpellating it.

Whatever readers may think of the book's particular  
 argument, one thing it makes abundantly clear: the  
 paradox of race, that is 'the challenge of having to work  
 with and against racial identification' (St Louis 2009:  
 560) will remain with us for some time to come, and it  
 will not be solved within the consensus-driven polder  
 model.

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